Justice and Witness Covenanted Ministry Report

Current Members: Bill Brinkhorst, Chaunia Chandler, Jane Fisler Hoffman, Larissa Forsythe, Marilynn Gibson Turner, James Hogue, Vernon Howard, Meredith Jackson, Isaiah Jackson-Post, Mike Krewson, Andrew Lovins, Barnet M. McKee, Jan Roddy (chair), Felicia Scott, Linda Stenger, Stephanie Tolson, Jacqueline Tyler, Kimi Yokoyama.

The focus for JWM efforts has been five-fold during this year. The JWM has felt reverence. These were (1) racial justice and (2) a moratorium/ the abolition of the Death Penalty in Missouri. In addition, our National UCC Economic Justice Minister brought our attention to (3) the struggles for a safe and fair workplace in the poultry industry, which directly impacts most of the members of our Marshallese congregations and their community in NW Arkansas. We also began to (4) make a progressive Christian public witness on timely justice issues within the MMSC area, as they came up and were brought to our attention. Lastly we have worked with the Communications Covenanted Ministry and office staff (5) towards the development of a JWM social media presence.

Racial Justice
A JWM Racial Justice Team was created and is lead by Dr. Vernon Howard Jr. The mission of the RJT is to bring prophetic witness and work around the issues of racial justice amongst the Missouri Mid-South Conference, with particular a general objective to ensure that the racial diversity and inclusion the Conference proclaims should be the norm for the outer community. Emphasis is placed upon:

- Leadership Training on Racial Inclusion and Diversity
- White Privilege Deconstruction
- Conference Staff Racial Inclusion
- African American Clergy and Clergy of Color Development
- African American Church/Congregational Development

This year the RJT has assembled a core group of clergy from within the Justice Witness Ministry who are developing a strategic plan to achieve goals in the above areas. This strategic plan will be presented to the broader Conference for prayerful affirmation. A first special initiative of the RJT will take place at the 2016 MMSC Annual Gathering where there will be an African American Clergy and Clergy of Color organizing event to inspire all around this effort.

Other related programs in development include an effort to broaden the opportunities for churches to engage in “Sacred Conversations on Racism.” A team of individuals with appropriate training is being developed as a resource for congregations. Planning is also underway for a "Sacred Conversations” youth camp that would serve 7th-12th graders. It would help youth to form groups around social justice issues in their local areas while gaining information and insights into organizing for future campaigns. There will be a focus on racism as systematic oppression and an introduction to the “Fabric of Oppression,” looking at the many forms of oppression that are used to divide humanity. Sonya Vann leads this effort.
Death Penalty
A resolution was forwarded and approved at CAG 2015 calling for a moratorium on the Death Penalty in Missouri. Since that time, legislative efforts within the MO congress and by related groups have shifted towards total abolition. Advocacy letters were sent to all members of the Missouri House and Senate as well at the Governor and Attorney General. Other letters related to recent legality and ethical concerns about the procurement of execution drugs and related services were sent to appropriate public officials. JWM co-sponsored a three city presentation tour of Jeanne Bishop, author of Change of Heart: Justice, Mercy and Making Peace with My Sister’s Killer in March. Her visit was organized by the Missouri Clergy Alliance for Alternatives to the Death Penalty. Additional Co-sponsors included: Missourians for Alternatives to the Death Penalty, the Missouri Catholic Conference and the Buddhist Churches. Jeanne was accompanied across the state by Rev. Dr. Jane Fisler Hoffman, JWM member and Convener of the Clergy Alliance. Presentations, meetings with key public officials and press conferences were held in Kansas City, Jefferson City and St. Louis.

Poultry Workers Justice
JWM representative Jan Roddy met with UCC Economic Minister Rassell and attended the Tyson Company Shareholders meeting in Springdale AR. We stood with workers in a related public protest, met with Rev. Albon Langbon, pastor to one of the Marshallese UCC congregations and learned about the unfair and dangerous work lives of hundreds of our MMS Conference siblings and their co-workers. Connections were made to the regional NW AR Workers Justice Center and we participated in the unveiling of an important study on conditions in the poultry industry lead by the Unitarian Universalists Service Committee.

Public Witness
We wrote letters to public officials and/or sent press releases on the following over the past year: support for U of MO students protesting racism on campus, MO SJR 39, Death Penalty, Parkway School District LGBTQ affirming curriculum, affirmation of the Girl Scouts of America with offer of UCC church meeting places as a response to the St. Louis Catholic Archbishop’s disenfranchising statement.

Social Media
We plan to launch a JWM website and Facebook page in June 2016. The goal for these social media tools is to share information and valuable resources, and to help build networks throughout the Conference around various social justice issues.