

A History of the First Principle Project
Of First Parish Unitarian Universalist
Bridgewater, MA

For the Rev. Paul Sprecher



The Mission of the First Principle Project:

To Affirm, Promote and Celebrate the
inherent worth and dignity of every person

By Susan Holton, Betty Gilson & Rev. Rachel Tedesco, May 2014
(rev. October 2014)

Two women sitting at a kitchen table with two cups of tea; this is how the First Principle Project began.

Betty Gilson, chair of the Social Justice Committee and Susan Holton talked about their concern around issues of racism in the Bridgewater area and wanted to find out what was being done about it. They decided to show Traces of the Trade, a film about the slave trade in Bristol, RI, a town about 30 miles from our church.

More than 20 people from the church and town viewed the film and came to a subsequent meeting to talk about racial justice and what First Parish in Bridgewater (FPB) might do to address the issues.

A dozen people came to the following meeting. A wonderful discussion ensued as people talked what we wanted to do. Two things were decided. The first is that we wanted not only to talk about the issues, but also to take action. Second, we decided the name of the group should be the First Principle Project, reflecting our purpose based on the First Principle of Unitarian Universalism, to affirm, promote and celebrate “the inherent worth and dignity of every person.”

Every other committee in the congregation included only adults. In light of our mission, we determined that it was important to open our project to every person in the congregation. The first of our young members, Rosalynn D’Alarcao-Litchfield, agreed to write a letter to all people over 8 in the Religious Education program. As a result of her letter, five young people joined the First Principle Project.

Serendipitously, an article appeared in the Bridgewater weekly paper presenting a story about a teenager, Raina Terry, who had experienced discrimination in the schools in her entire academic career. Two members of our Project called Raina and her mother, Delores Terry to tell them about our Project and to ask if they (the members) could come to talk with them. As a result of that important discussion, Raina said that what we could do to make a difference was to teach the children in the schools about discrimination and why it is important not to practice it.

After some research, we found the *Open Circle* program at Wellesley College, which trained teachers to do that. Naming our effort Raina’s Dream, we decided to create a worship service which included Raina and her father, Raymond Terry. He reflected on his school experience which was similar to Raina’s more than 25 years later. Every member of the Project was involved and Susan Holton presented the sermon. After Raina and her father spoke, and Susan Holton preached, a collection was taken for “Raina’s Dream.” From a congregation of 55 people, more than \$1,000 was given. Yes, MORE THAN \$1,000!!!! We were overwhelmed! We felt that if we got \$100, we would call the day a success.

Instead during that one service we made more than enough to send one teacher to the Open Circle program.

Knowing that the program would have greater impact if more than one person attended the program, Betty Gilson, co-chair of our Project, asked the School Committee to send another teacher to *Open Circle*. Unfortunately, the School Committee never provided the money, so only one new teacher was trained.

However, Raina's Dream was fulfilled beyond our wildest dream.

At the next meeting, we talked about the worship service and its success. We wanted to continue fulfilling our mission of action based on the First Principle of Unitarian Universalism. And as we talked about the ways we might do that, the direction came from our youth.

"A little child shall lead them," was the case here. The young people in the First Principle Project talked about the discomfort of people in their sports team when they were going to play in Brockton. They said that as soon as their bus drove into town, the kids worried about what was going to happen. Adults confirmed their feelings and said that they avoided the mall in Brockton. Obviously there was a problem with the relationships with the two communities.

Rev. Rachel Tedesco, Community Minister at First Parish Bridgewater, is an active member of the Brockton Interfaith Community. She knew one of the other ministers actively involved, Rev. Michael Walker of Messiah Baptist Church in Brockton. Messiah Baptist Church is a predominately, at least 95% Black church, while First Parish Unitarian Universalist is a predominately White church with at least 97% White members. Based on Rev. Tedesco's recommendation, we decided to explore with Rev. Walker the possibilities for the members of both churches, adults and youth, to get together for a social event.

Rev. Tedesco and Rev. Walker agreed to meet with their Christian Education Director, Sharon Molden, our Religious Education Director, Ellen Bordman of First Parish, and Korin Zigler, chair of the FPB Religious Education Committee. They met to talk about what might be done to get people together. and agreed that getting to know each other was the important beginning. And they agreed on two events: first a social time, and the second the creation of a group of young people to collect food for Messiah's food pantry. Teenaged members of each church chaired the effort. Miranda Zigler, who was in charge (with her mother) created an excellent program with her youth group friends. They raised much more food than was expected.

At the end of the day, as often happens at the end of church events, everyone stood in a circle and gave a word or two about how they felt about the event

Rev. Walker of Messiah and Susan Holton, co-chair of FPP, began to talk about the day. One of them – in the wonderful spirit of collaboration – said “we should do this again”...we should have our religious education programs get together...we should have all of our congregations get together for a service.”

And the rest, they say, is history. Rev. Walker was introduced to Rev. Ed Hardy, the minister of First Parish. Along with Dr. Holton of First Parish, they all decided that the churches should exchange congregations. So on one Sunday morning, the congregations of two churches – one Black and one White – worshipped together. The members of First Parish travelled to Messiah where Rev. Hardy preached. The young people of First Parish who worked on the Food Pantry Project were given tokens of thanks. Rosalynn who was instrumental in getting many young people to come to First Principle, was acknowledged as the leader of the youth involvement. Miranda Zigler and Sharon Molden of Messiah got all of the children and youth from both churches to stand before the congregation and sing together, conducted by Ms. Molden. Susan Holton was invited to share a few words. When she stood to do so, she looked out at the gathered congregations. Virtually every member of First Parish was there. Tears formed in her eyes as she became aware of this incredible moment.

It is said that the most segregated hour of the week is Sunday morning. We proved that the old adage doesn't need to be true. On this Sunday morning at least we experienced this most inspiring gathering of White and Black congregants. The Ministers, the Directors of Religious Education and Christian Education, and the members of the First Principle Project; knew that our discussions, mutual actions and interactions of many types were not over and that they would continue in the months ahead.

After the service at First Parish, a Deacon of Messiah declared:

“We are one church with two campuses”

Some members of both churches who were near enough to hear her rapidly agreed. That statement continues to be reality as our collaboration continues.

Again, the members of the First Parish Church and Messiah Baptist Church were overwhelmed by another successful experience of affirming, promoting and celebrating, ‘the inherent worth and dignity of every person’.”

Later in the year, Rev. Walker filled the pulpit at the worship service for the 7th Annual Peace Vigil. Rev. Walker delivered a very moving sermon exhorting us to face the issues of racism, and the rafters rang with the voices of the combined congregations. Many members of the Messiah Congregation were there for morning worship and a bountiful Pot Luck Dinner provided by First Parish

parishioners. The Parish Hall was filled upstairs and down with the intermingled groups breaking bread together.

Some ministers and some congregations who want to experience racial diversity would stop there, after worshipping together. However that is not the case with Messiah and First Parish. The interactions were so positive that members of both congregations wanted to keep going; we wanted to do more by worshipping together, studying together, and taking action together.

Following the two combined worship services, members of the First Principle Project, Rev. Walker and Linda Ross, a member of Messiah, decided to read and have a fishbowl discussion about the novel The Help. After reading the book, people of both churches gathered to talk about the ways in which the book reflected their lives. More than 20 members of the Bridgewater church attended the fishbowl discussion. Members of Messiah, related stories of their parents and grandparents who were “The help,” who were treated much the way the women in the book were. Then people from First Parish did the same; however for the most part they discussed the book from the “opposite side” from those who hired the help. Each group took its turn sitting in the middle of the fishbowl. Each group talked about the experiences and feelings that were brought up by the book. Then everyone joined in one circle to talk.

Many from both churches said that the conversations were quite impactful as we heard from “the other” and faced the reality of another’s life as we never had before.

For many people who took part, this was the first time they had a discussion of this nature with people of another race. Many talked of the new revelations and understandings that they would never have had without this experience. Some conversations continued after the formal ending.

The First Principle Project again fulfilled our mission of affirming, promoting and celebrating “the inherent worth and dignity of every person.”

The name “Messiah” became an often-used word at First Parish. One would often hear “our work with Messiah” or doing something with Messiah. As an event is planned, one often hears that it will be something to which we will invite our friends from Messiah. The relationship between First Parish and Messiah is well accepted; one could say that it is now a part of the culture of First Parish.

Near this time, members of the First Principle Project joined with a group from Messiah to honor students who came to a weekly success program which included junior high school volunteers (?) who came to the church to work with the students.

At this time, First Parish in Bridgewater had an Accredited Interim Minister, The Rev. Dr. Anita Farber-Robertson. She and Rev. Walker knew each other from their work at Andover Newton Theological School. This might have been one of the factors in their ability to work so well together, and to continue the relationship of the two churches.

The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness by Michelle Alexander was recommended by the Unitarian Universalist Association at the 2013 General Assembly to be read and discussed during the coming year. Dr. Alexander gave the Ware Lecture that year. In part because of the UUA's recommendation and the desire to know more about the topic, members of the First Principle Project felt that our next discussion should be about that book. Rev. Walker had already planned workshops on the book and we were invited to participate in the group. As an extra bonus, he included some relevant biblical verses and some history of the American Baptist Church and Unitarian Universalism as well.

Members of First Parish and of Messiah joined weekly in difficult discussions of the history and current reality of The New Jim Crow. The audio, video and written information by Michelle Alexander at General Assembly provided important supplemental resources to further understand the subject. The book discussions were followed by a fish bowl discussion of similar format as before.

This was definitely the most difficult of all sessions we had together. While people of both churches spoke about the pain and anger that the book released, they agreed that this was an incredibly valuable learning experience for everyone involved. Conversations between people at First Parish continue today, and are the impetus for the Project's focus on mass incarceration, as it has been with Unitarian Universalists throughout the country.

One woman from Messiah made a significant reflection when some First Parish people asked about why we didn't know more about these problems. Her answer was "you were not listening." Wow!

The disquieting discussion of mass incarceration created much discomfort among many members of First Parish. The members agreed that mass incarceration is so significant a problem that action that must be taken. We made a decision that we had talked about this issue enough. It was time to fulfill our mission of combining talk and action.

Until this point, every discussion and event (with the exception of a worship service) occurred at Messiah in Brockton. When some members of Messiah were asked about coming to First Parish in Bridgewater, we were told that some people from Messiah were uncomfortable "crossing the line" to Bridgewater, a

church which they assumed was probably 98% white. Many of us from First Parish were surprised to hear that literal reverse of the concern spoken by so many members of First Principle Project. Crossing the line for some in both churches reflected their discomfort in going the few miles to the “land of the other.” After all, we thought we were “safe” and there was no need to be fearful. Given that discomfort, members of the First Principle Project as well as some from Messiah Baptist Church agreed that this reality was something that we need to address. People of each congregation agreed that this could be used as a “teachable moment” and an impetus to change the feelings on the part of people in both congregations.

Earlier in our involvement with Messiah, we became aware of a program called Restore Living Hope. It was a program in which young people in Brockton who were “at risk” became involved in a program supported by Messiah. Church members also were involved in supporting the parents. Some members of First Principle went to their graduation ceremony from Restore Living Hope and the parents and children glowed with pride over their achievements.

A few of our members became involved as tutors in the program, and attended board meetings to determine in what ways we might become involved.

Unfortunately, the person running the program at Messiah burned out and no one has taken on this responsibility.

Other members of First Parish were energized by their Jim Crow discussions and became excited about another program, “Read to me, Daddy,” a model of which has been used by the prison in Concord, Mass. It was at a meeting of the “Jobs Not Jails!” campaign at the Arlington UU church that FPP member Sonia D’Alarcao first heard of this program. At our next meeting she described it in some detail.

The program is based on the theory that connecting incarcerated men with their children is an excellent way to re-establish a relationship between the two. Stories about the success of this program abound as the men involved in it, and their families, gain significant bonds and decrease the incidence of recidivism.

In “Read to me, Daddy,” a group of men incarcerated men are chosen to be a part of the project. After working together with a supervisor and staff, they choose a book to read to their children. After receiving assistance as needed, including feedback from their peers, they are videotaped reading the book to their children, who receive the book and the video.

Members of First Principle Project brought this ‘Read to me Daddy’ idea to Ms. Sue McCombe, Director of the Office of University and Community Partnership at Bridgewater State University. Some faculty were already involved in programs at

the prison. Because of First Principle Project's efforts, and Ms. McCombe's excellent leadership at the University, interested people from the University agreed to gather to talk about working together, using their professional knowledge to develop the program locally. The departments of criminal justice, psychology, and communication will join with First Principle Project and directors and staff of the Old Colony Correction Center. Members of the congregations of First Parish and Messiah will be involved as they continue to work in partnership in the planning and execution of "Read to me Daddy."

While the more intense action events were taking place, it was marvelous to have one event which was more low key and provided informal interaction. Supported by the FPP, First Parish Religious Education led by Korin Zigler, RE chair, and Messiah Christian Education, chaired by Sharon Molden, people of all ages from both churches worked together on the "Empty Bowls" project. In a two part program, first the bowls were painted, fired and prepared for human use. On a second day, people from Messiah and First Parish came together to buy the bowls and have soup and bread together. 100 bowls were painted and about \$1,000 was made by selling the soup in the new bowls. The proceeds of the event were split between the Town of Bridgewater's and Messiah's food pantries. The room was full of people enjoying conversations and painting. Again, it was wonderful to see folks from both churches together while learning more about each other.

A sign of the success of the partnership of First Parish and Messiah is that people at our church use "Messiah" in talking about our partnership. First Parish and Messiah are seen as a bi-denominational group which does important work together. The First Principle Project and Messiah Baptist Church make real the deacon's declaration that we are "one church with two campuses".

In the future, the First Principle Project, along with both religious education programs will work together on our earlier-stated goal of having fun together. We plan to get together for a picnic, with games, great food and just having a great time. At an early meeting, the young people in the group suggested a picnic as a way to get to know each other. That idea was put "on the back burner" as action was taken in other, more intense, projects. However, we still look forward to this happening.

Simultaneously, First Principle Project, First Parish and Messiah Baptist Church are now involved in significant action, joined by hundreds of others in the state. First Principle Project supports many other action initiatives.

As a result of the discussion of The New Jim Crow and the awareness of problems within the criminal justice system, the members of First Principle Project and others in the church have joined together to fight the mass

incarceration. Members of the group have joined with UU Mass Action and others across the state to work against the current mass incarceration problems.

A number of actions have been taken against mass incarceration. Led by Rev. Rachel Tedesco, First Parish's Community Minister, a stronger and more active relationship with the Brockton Interfaith Community (BIC) has been developed. One of BIC's primary focuses this year is the "Jobs Not Jails!" campaign. Through BIC's leadership, two buses from the greater Brockton area gathered at the State House to show their support for the "Jobs not Jail!" Campaign. The involvement of more than 100 UUs along with other faith, peace and justice groups showed the media and the politicians the strength of the support. A number of First Principle Project members attended the rally including Rev. Rachel Tedesco, Laurie Lessner and her daughter Shara, Karen Cruz, Angela Sheble, and Betty Gilson

A powerful documentary "The House I Live In: What prisons cost us in dollars, lives and possibilities" was shown twice in the First Parish Sanctuary. The second showing brought together representatives of state and local government, including Allison Hallett, Director of the Mass. Alcohol and Substance Abuse Center (MASAC) at the Old Colony Correctional Center (OCCC) in Bridgewater. Also attending were faculty, students and staff from Bridgewater State University, several church members and other members of the Bridgewater community.

After the film showing, Jack Cole, Founder of Law Enforcement Against Prohibition (LEAP) spoke. Then State Senator Marc Pacheco and Representative Angelo D'Emilia gave brief messages of support. Frank Yeatman of First Parish talked about his work with OCCC inmates in a gardening project. Ms. Hallett talked about other programs offered at OCCC. After the movie and presentations, the participants discussed what they could do to address the issue of mass incarceration.

Members of the First Principle Project will meet early in the church year to determine their focus this year. The programs which were started in the past church year will continue as we work with BIC and UU Mass Action.

We believe that the involvement of First Principle Project has followed its mission, "to affirm, promote and celebrate, the 'inherent worth and dignity of every person'".

First Principle Project leadership:

Betty Gilson and Susan Holton have served as co-chairs of the Project for the past several years. They were joined recently by Rev. Rachel Tedesco. It should be noted that the involvement of other members has been fluid as other responsibilities, especially on the Search Committee, have needed their focus.