

Shaking Foundations

Presentation to UCC, Westerly on the Mission of Westerly, ARC

11 June 2023

Thank you Rev. Hainsworth for your warm welcome and kind words. To our friends at UCC Westerly, a blessed and good morning to you!

My name is Anne Pearce. I am a founding member of the Westerly Anti-Racism Coalition. We - I am joined by ARC members, April Dinwoodie, Leslie Dunn, Madeline Labriola, and Geoff Serra - are so pleased to be here with you this morning to share the history and mission of our Westerly ARC community.

Like many on ARC, I began this journey by attending the Black Lives Matter protest on the steps of the Westerly Post Office in May 2020 after George Floyd was killed. I joined with many others to stand in solidarity with the Black community to protest the increasing incidents of police brutality, violence, and discrimination against Black people, and to assert that Black Lives Matter.

The unofficial motto of the U.S. Postal Service is “Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night stops these couriers.” In this same spirit, we, a group of local citizens, rain or shine, have assembled each Sunday morning on the front steps of Westerly’s Post Office in town for nearly three years. We stand peacefully to deliver a message about equity and inclusion. Who are we? Why are we there?

We are neighbors, friends, coworkers, and relatives – we see each other in the grocery store, in church, at sporting events, in coffee shops, and running errands in town. We are ordinary citizens, who, like so many, care

deeply about all who call Westerly home and those who come to work and play here. We have no affiliation with any state or national organization.

Our arc of activism officially began in June 2020, inspired by 200 folks gathered at the Post Office in the wake of George Floyd's death and buoyed by a longing to create space for loving and practical conversations about racism and diversity in Westerly. The Sunday vigils continued, friendships developed, ideas exchanged, and deeper conversations began. The question became "Now what?" We knew we could stand on the Post Office steps forever, but if we didn't have a plan of action, and if we didn't know what it was we wanted to change, we were just wasting our time. This led to more serious meetings to develop a strategy for change for our town. After weekly meetings and intense discussion, we drew up a list of goals, strategies, and measures of success.

By December 2020, we began hosting community conversations with town leaders, including members of clergy, law enforcement, the Westerly Public Library, School Committee, Town Council, Chamber of Commerce, United Theatre, and WARM Center. We wanted to share experiences, listen first hand to the realities of the impact of racism and bias in town, and discuss possible solutions. Participants shared thoughtful stories and perspectives and helped everyone to know one another and envision ways to thrive as we meet the changing needs of our community.

These warmly received conversations encouraged us to organize efforts to advocate for change. We committed to the hard work of educating ourselves and others about inequity's economic and social costs, not just for people of color, but for all. In January 2021, the Westerly Anti-Racism Coalition (ARC) was founded. Now, three years later, ARC is a vibrant, dedicated, group of over 150 people who know that every Sunday from 11am-1pm there is a peaceful vigil at the Westerly Post Office. We have expanded our circle of concern to include gender issues, poverty, mental

health, climate, and nuclear war as well as the political realities of our time. Every Sunday we provide opportunities for education, conversation, to share local talent, and to create a safe space for all. We have a website, about 300 subscribers to our weekly newsletter, a monthly column in the Westerly Sun, and active social media accounts. But standing in peaceful solidarity on the street every Sunday is the heart and soul of Westerly ARC.

Our mission is 3-fold - to educate, empower, and embrace.

We work to EDUCATE ourselves and others regarding the impact racism and other types of injustice have on all of us. We constantly seek to turn our knowledge into action. A few of our recent educational opportunities include:

- Partnered with the Westerly Public Library for the Community Conversations series and a community book club discussing Heather McGhee's *The Sum of Us*.
- Presented the Black Voices Film Series with the United Theatre.
- Regularly feature guest speakers at our Sunday protests who educate us on topics such as voting rights, environmental racism, cultural and religious celebrations, housing rights, local history, and more.
- Provide access to the Mobile Social Justice Library @beyondthestacks.
- Network and present with a variety of anti-racist and social justice organizations from across RI and CT.
- Organize an Annual Juneteenth community event.

We EMPOWER others to advocate for those who are fighting for justice.

- We attend and speak out at Town Council and School Committee meetings.

- We supported the creation of Westerly's first Multiculturalism Committee.
- We write letters to the editor, and publish a weekly newsletter,
- We network with other groups to become more effective in our advocacy work.
- All of our work is based on thorough research. Some recent examples of ARC's efforts to empower include position papers we wrote on
 - Why Our Schools Need an Equity Audit
 - Letters of Support to Westerly Teachers
 - The Effect of Roe v. Wade Decision on Civil Rights
 - A Reproductive Rights Statement
 - A Statement on the Massacre in Buffalo, NY, and
 - Position Papers to support or defeat legislation.

We EMBRACE a variety of ways to be involved in and impact our community, including our weekly gatherings every Sunday on the Post Office steps in downtown Westerly. Our occasional Children's Day is a big hit. We have a Calendar page for upcoming events and ways you can be involved.

We advocate for more representation of people of color in leadership positions. We are very proud to have run a very successful grass-roots campaign to elect 3 qualified, diverse candidates as leaders in our town - Leslie Dunn to the Westerly School Committee, Kevin Lowther to the Westerly Town Council, and Victoria Gu to the RI State Senate.

As we reflect on the realities of the past 3 years in communities that may seem far away, we are reminded of the urgent need to support the physical, emotional, and psychological safety of Persons of Color right here in Westerly. While we may not know exactly how to process all that has happened, it is clear that now is not the time to look away or naively

believe our community is somehow protected from the impact of racism and bias.

Now is the time to steer directly in the direction of action — of doing all we can to be educated about the impacts of systemic racism and bias, celebrate multiculturalism, and move with a spirit of love for an even more beautiful, safe, and inclusive community.

ARC is on a journey committed to the belief that when people come together to mentor, learn, and speak up and out, they contribute to a community deeply respectful of all races, ethnic groups, and identities with space for many cultures, a community that treats all peoples with respect, love, and openness. Fairness, integrity and inclusiveness hinge on the skills of citizens. We know this will take time.

The deeper we dive into the needs of our community, the more we realize we cannot work in isolation. We need to be part of a larger community, and we welcome opportunities to partner with those active in similar work. At the same time, we seek to deepen our work with one another. Collegueship has always been a central facet of our work.

Our challenge is to become a healthy community that fosters the growth and connection of all individuals within it. Individuals in turn lend their strength to others. The ripples extend widely, and in these years fraught with difficulties, but filled with possibilities, it is hard to say how far we can go in fostering social renewal. But it is clear that the possibility exists.

Reformers have long recognized love as the most powerful driver of social change. The civil rights leaders who initiated our nation's reckoning with racism in the 1950s and 1960s did so in the name of love. Their monumental advocacy aimed to create a "beloved community," an idea

popularized by Martin Luther King Jr. as a vision of social harmony. ARC holds the fullness of this vision.

Faith was the bedrock of civil rights leader and US Congressman, John Lewis. He taught us “to stand for something, and to make our position and values unequivocally clear by our actions,” and “to accept the way of peace, the way of love, as a way of living, not just a technique.” I believe this “way of love” is the same message in today’s scripture. Jesus says “Hear my words, and act on them.” This implies soul-searching down to our very thoughts and motives and through our biases. It means continually examining ourselves in light of the Scriptures, which center on two main subjects: to love God with all your heart, mind, and soul; and, to love your neighbor as you love yourself. But this love, as Lewis aspired to live it, as Jesus inspires us to live it, is not a way you feel; it’s a way of being. “ It’s a way of action. It’s not necessarily passive. It has capacity. It has the ability to bring peace out of conflict. It has the strength to stir things up, to shake foundations, to make things right.

There is a phrase, an African proverb, that when you pray, move your feet. Lewis used it often. It’s an amazing phrase. I hope together we can find a way of love, of love in action, a way of moving our feet - together. Thank you for this time together this morning and for the opportunity to share with you ARC’s vision.

Anne Pearce,
Westerly ARC, Founder & Steering Team

