

GREENFIELD RECORDER



Ashfield churches exploring race through discussion series

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ASHFIELD — Twelve members of the First Congregational and St. John’s Episcopal churches of Ashfield are examining America’s history of racism and the role the church has historically played in it as part of a six-month, 10-session program, “Sacred Ground: A Film-Based Dialogue Series on Race and Faith.”

Annie Cheatham, a trustee of the First Congregational Church who has been facilitating sessions, described the program as “a history course on how white supremacy has impacted all these different groups in America.”

“We have to find ways to lament our sins and our years of blindness,” she said.

While the Episcopal Church originally created the program, it is now open to any denomination.

Cheatham participated in the program with a North Carolina church. Now she and the Rev. Vicki Ix, who took the course in Greenfield, have agreed to co-lead the “Sacred Ground” circle between the two Ashfield churches.



Some of the 12 members of the “Sacred Ground” circle — Wendy Pree, Ann Gibson, Annie Cheatham and the Rev. David Jones — meet at the First Congregational Church of Ashfield. STAFF PHOTO/PAUL FRANZ

“God calls us to be a people of reconciliation, serving a world in need,” Ix said in a press release. “Courageous people have taken the risk of standing up and speaking out against systems of white supremacy.”

The content is a mix of film and written works. Books in the program include “Waking Up White” by Debby Irving and “Jesus and the Disinherited” by Howard Thurman. The group members watch videos and read materials prior to their meetings and then come ready to discuss.

Some of the topics they’ve learned about are Native American schools, redlining (a discriminatory practice that puts services out of reach for residents of certain areas based on race or ethnicity), local Indigenous histories of New England and the slave trade. The church will also look at Latino histories and Asian American histories in the United States, and consider the legacy of racism’s existence through trauma and things like incarceration.



Some of the 12 members of the “Sacred Ground” circle — Annie Cheatham, the Rev. David Jones, Wendy Pree and Ann Gibson — meet at the First Congregational Church of Ashfield. STAFF PHOTO/PAUL FRANZ



The First Congregational Church of Ashfield. STAFF PHOTO/PAUL FRANZ

The syllabus is provided by the “Sacred Ground” program and the group usually meets every other week, so far only on Zoom.

“Doing this in a spiritual context really requires us to go inside and examine our own prejudices and privileges,” Cheatham said. “There’s a kind of internal searching which, being part of a church, you kind of expect to do anyway.”

“For me, this is a process of coming to see our own place and time with fresh depth and clarity, and of establishing a foundation specifically in the church to study the issues of Franklin County and western Mass. that should shape the church of the future,” said the Rev. David Jones, minister at the First Congregational Church and one of the 12 “Sacred Ground” circle participants. “If we commit to studying and working together, anything will be possible for the people we serve right here in Ashfield.”

The group is currently locked in at 12 participants, but Cheatham is hopeful that some of the people who have participated will facilitate new circles once this one concludes.



The Rev. Vicki Ix, vicar at St. John’s Episcopal Church, is a co-leader of the “Sacred Ground” circle. Contributed Photo

As someone raised in the south, Cheatham said she brings different stories from others in the group who have grown up in New England. Cheatham grew up in a very segregated North Carolina during the era of Jim Crow laws.

“This has been an opportunity for me to share my stories and unpack my prejudices, and how growing up I was taught very subtly that I was better than Black people,” she said.

“Being with the church has helped me feel loved while I do this very difficult work that I’m ashamed of a lot of the time,” Cheatham continued. “It really calls you to be honest and to understand what our race has done to others.”