

# **Town of West Hartford Human Rights Commission**

## ***Minutes of Meeting May 5, 2021***

Meeting convened by Co-Chair Adrienne Billings Smith 7:03 p.m. EDT

ABS welcomes new commissioner Eric Schoenberg replacing Michael Pincus.

ABS calls attendance: All current members in good standing are in attendance.

Co-Chair Adrienne Billings-Smith

Co-Chair Esam Boraey

Secretary Dawn Ennis

Commissioners Theodore Mancini, Aurora Melita, Sarah Raskin, Kristen Sowell

We were joined by facilitator Pramod Pradhan

ABS welcomed faith leaders of the community

Rabbi Michael Pincus, Chief Rabbi of Congregation Beth Israel, West Hartford

Bishop John Selders Jr., Pastor of Amistad United Church of Christ in Hartford

Rev. Erica Wimber Avena, Interim Senior Pastor at First Baptist Church, West Hartford.

Each spoke about their efforts toward advancing human rights.

- Rabbi Pincus talked about working with Black churches and “expanding our concept of community” through the [Greater Hartford Interfaith Action Alliance or GHIAA](#).
- Bishop Selders spoke of “focused actions” like BLM and “turn-ups” and the CT Poor People’s Campaign.
- Rev. Avena discussed her church’s charitable work: soup kitchen, bike club, nursery school and child care programs, and the JP Webster Lending Library, the largest church-based lending library in New England. First Church also facilitates the state-funded Care for Kids program and has open slots, and is working with West Hartford Public Schools to become a “School Readiness” provider for early childhood. The church also has programs to raise awareness among its white congregants of white privilege and how Black Lives Matter.

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Eric Schoenberg asked about those open slots and was directed by Rev. Avena to contact Dawn Quinn the director of their academy.

Dawn Ennis asked the faith leaders about their response to the growing number of “Nones” — people who have no religious affiliation. Bishop Selders spoke of how churches used to be a center of activity and how he has used television to connect his congregants and remain relevant.

Ted Mancini asked Rev. Avena about her church’s efforts in educating white congregants about Black Lives Matter. “You made the comment about white people need to be having a conversation with other white people about the Black

community and Black people. What is it you and/or your church is doing with Black people and/or the Black community to have conversations among themselves about the white people or white community?" Rev. Avena first discussed the renaming of the Goodman Green to Unity Green on June 20 thanks to the efforts of the Concerned Parents of Color of West Hartford, and then responded: "For a long time, at least in the churches I have served, white people really didn't know what to say to other white people about issues of race, because for many white people, the privilege of their whiteness is outside of their awareness most of the time." She went on to describe what her colleagues in historically Black churches have described to her as instability as their members change affiliation to non-black houses of worship, and her aim to build bridges between churches "and strengthen one another's ministries."

TM followed up: "The basis of the conversation then is grounded in white privilege?" Rev. Avena responded to say, "That would be part of the conversation, being made aware of that."

TM replied: "The premise is white racism, then, is the whole basis of the conversation. When your premise is racist, the only thing that can come from that, is the conversation on racists, where it's already predetermined that the individual who's white is racist."

ABS responded to TM: "I think she's saying in order to have the conversation you have to recognize some things about yourself. Having white privilege does not automatically mean racism." She went on to describe efforts at education, equity and diversity and explained that Rev. Avena had not once mentioned racism.

Sarah Raskin stated that since racism is not a focus of this meeting's scheduled conversation, she suggested it could be discussed at a future meeting and introduced a new question to Bishop Selders. SR identified herself as a Jewish atheist who is the daughter of two Jewish atheists and asked if she needed to be a member of his congregation to take part in his church's social justice work and other events.

Rabbi Pincus interjected to offer the thought that any group or community is stronger together than we are individually. He talked about identity and human rights, the obligations we have to each other and to ask the question, "Who is my neighbor?" He spoke of how siloed we are, living in bubbles, and how Hartford could have been miles away instead of just next door based on how little people here interacted with Hartford residents. We stay within our own lines. He closed by reminding us all "We don't know what other people need, or how people are hurting, how people are suffering. The more we can break down those barriers, and the more we can listen to each other, and the more we can be there for our neighbors, I think the more we are doing the work of the Human Rights Commission."

Bishop Selders followed Rabbi Pincus with more thoughts on what it means to be a neighbor, a person of faith, and a member of a faith family. He also answered SR's question: No, you don't have to be a member to take part in his church's activities.

Aurora Melita asked the faith leaders for advice on how to support someone and to allow for forgiveness and empathy. Rev. Avena suggested, "We do that by strengthening the social fabric, getting to know people." Bishop Selders said, "Until you know someone's story, until you can walk empathetically in someone else's shoes, you might want to keep your mouth off of it. And just be. What people really need and find important is our intensity and one's ability to just be present. That's valued. That's gold."

Bishop Selders thanked Rabbi Pincus for his contributions to the conversation and noted that Jesus was a Jew and an organizer. He then offered this closing thought: "Human rights and the dignity and work and value of any single person has is an important distinction to make." He later added, "When we start to talk about human rights, and let's be clear, we're talking about that which supports and engenders us to be in some kind of collective, with our differences. Also understanding "E Pluribus Unum:" "We are one." We are one human family. Seek ways to recognize our difference and also recognize our commonality and those two things are not mutually exclusive."

At 8:03 p.m. ABS thanked the faith leaders for joining the WHHRC meeting and noted that co-chair Esam Boraey had to depart early to observe Ramadan.

ABS announced the Community Awards would be postponed until December due to lack of interest from members of the community.

DE presented the schedule of events for West Hartford Pride which are:  
June 1 at 8:30 a.m. Flag raising ceremony on what will be renamed Unity Green  
June 8th at 5pm: HealthySexuals - virtual programming/Gilead  
June 11th at 4-9pm: Pride Night at GastroPark on New Park Ave  
June 12th TBD  
June 22nd at 5pm: Fighting Sigma Through Personal Action /Gilead  
June 23rd at 7pm: Tell Me Another: LGBTQ+ Experience at Universalist Church of West Hartford  
June 25th: QueerFlix: An LGBTQ+ Mini FilmFest begins (Virtual)  
June 26th: Pride Festival in BlueBack Square. QueerFlix continues  
June 27th: QueerFlix continues

Commissioners Kristen Sowell and Eric Schoenberg volunteered to staff the June 26 event to represent the WHHRC and hand out information.

ABS announced details of Juneteenth celebration on June 19 and Unity Green dedication on June 20. DE and SR volunteered to staff the June 20 event to represent the WHHRC and hand out information.

TM provided an update on the coaches dispute with the West Hartford Youth Football League. He reported CHRO found evidence of discrimination and that the two sides now hoped to resolve the matter without having to resort to legal action.

The next agenda item was about construction signs in Town. ABS informed the commission that she contacted the Town government and spoke with council member Liam Sweeney about a complaint spotted on Facebook regarding construction signs that were labeled "Men At Work," which does not accurately represent that women also work construction in our Town. ABS learned the Town regulates signage posted by contractors and that Public Works would be inspecting such signs going forward to make sure they are compliant and not discriminatory. ABS thanked Council member Sweeney for his commitment to this situation and swift response.

ABS suggested the following future topic for WHHRC: Pride Month. Invite Pride committee chair Barry Walters to speak next month, at the June 2 meeting.

DE suggested we should also invite a nonbinary individual to help commissioners understand their unique needs and struggles.

KS also has a recommendation for a guest to invite.

SR suggested the WHHRC consider action on reparations for slavery and noted other municipalities across the U.S. are doing so. She offered the idea that the WHHRC could ask the Town Council to form a committee to consider what reparations would look like in West Hartford.

SR and DE volunteered to work on a report and a draft letter to the WHHRC to consider at the June 2 meeting.

ABS mentioned WHHRC should also consider inviting members of other commissions to speak to us about their shared goals and visions.

AM spoke about a card game called [Skin Deep Conversations](#) and suggested WHHRC could sponsor an event utilizing this concept to foster conversations, connections and deeper understanding. ABS offered the idea that WHHRC could partner with other groups in this effort. TM asked if white privilege could be one of the topics addressed. AM said there were many ways to envision how this could be utilized, and offered to make a presentation at the next WHHRC meeting June 2.

SR reminded commissioners to get their bios to DE and EB for a much-needed update to the WHHRC website no later than June 1.

ABS announced she was leaving the WHHRC for another appointment, the Civilian Police Review Board, a volunteer position within the Town Government. Members of the commission thanked her for her leadership.

ABS announced the next meeting is June 2. A motion was made to adjourn the meeting and was seconded at 8:43 p.m.

Dawn Ennis  
Secretary