

LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENT
UNITY GREEN DEDICATION
JUNE 20, 2021

When Adrienne Billings-Smith first approached First Church with the request that the Church rename this land, Unity Green – a name that would reflect a more inclusive history of West Hartford, it set First Church on a course of self-examination and reflection.

By examining our history through a more inclusive lens, we realized that the history of West Hartford did not begin with the arrival of Thomas Hooker in 1636, or the settlement of the Western Division in 1679, or the establishment of the Fourth Church of Christ (our original name) in 1713. The history of the Town and the land upon which we stand, began over ten thousand 10,000 years ago when Paleo-Indians began to populate the Northeastern woodlands. That history continued with generations of Native Americans who stewarded the land through what archeologists call the archaic period.

By the time of European settlement in the 1630s, the land that we now call Connecticut was occupied by a diverse group of bands and tribes who spoke dialects of the Algonquian-language. The Sequin or River Indians, as they were previously called, lived on the land along the Connecticut River; these included the Tunxis, Saukiog, Poquonnuc, Podunk, Wangunk, Hammonasset and Quinnapiac. The land that is now Hartford and West Hartford, formerly called Saukiog or “Black Earth,” was home to the Suckiag, and the Tunxis. This land was purchased by the English settlers from the Great Sachem, Sequasson.

We also recognize that for the Native Americans and European settlers, concepts of land ownership and land use had vastly different meanings, and these different cultural understandings led to confusion and conflict. We hope to better understand this history as more research provides a clearer picture of these interactions.

We also wish also to recognize the significant research undertaken by Tracey Wilson, Liz Devine and Denise DeMello through the Witness Stones project. By interpreting the raw data of church membership rolls, wills and estate records, their research revealed a clearer picture of the lives of the enslaved persons who

lived in the West Division and attended the Congregational Church during colonial times and into the 19th century.

We are very grateful to Adrienne for engaging the congregation in the difficult conversation about acknowledging our past involvement with slavery. She then shared her vision of Unity Green as a place to foster community conversation and as place to tell the previously untold stories, as a way to give voice to members of the community often overlooked in traditional history.

By better understanding our past, and by embracing the concept of unity, we are better able set a course to work toward a more just and inclusive future.

Adrienne came to us with passion and commitment that was both sincere and infectious. She is incredibly organized and focused. She presents a clear vision, but is open to all ideas. Her efforts truly embody the inclusiveness for which she strives.

We would also like thank Mayor Shari Cantor for her help in facilitating this wonderful celebration. She was generous with her time and her assistance in providing town support in organizing the weekend's events. We appreciate the efforts of all the Town employees who helped make this dedication possible.

As we dedicate Unity Green we emphasize, this is not the culmination of a "one-and-done" project, but the beginning of a collaborative effort. We look forward to continuing to work with Adrienne and the coalition of creative thinkers she has gathered together to celebrate our diverse and dynamic town.

Barbara Lewis, Former Church Historian
First Church of Christ, West Hartford