Statement from the Rhode Island State Council of Churches

June 17, 2020

Very recently the issue of the name of the State of Rhode Island has again been called into question with a change.org petition that has been widely circulated supporting removal of the "and Providence Plantations" from the official state name.

This issue has come up before, and various attempts to move it forward, including most recently 2009/2010 when it was defeated on a statewide ballot question.

But now we are in a time of change in our state, our country and the world. The pandemic and recent violent acts by police against members of the communities of color have moved us in significant ways. The impact of the pandemic on communities of color, and indeed many of the protests recently demanding change following the death of George Floyd, have highlighted existing inequities in our society and the impact of systemic racism in many areas such as health care, education, housing, job discrimination and police brutality and violence. The impact of these protests and broad discussions that are now resulting has resulted in many leaders in Rhode Island (especially political dignitaries) acknowledging that they need to LISTEN to the lived experiences of the black and brown people in our state, and to acknowledge and urgently work toward change in areas that matter for our communities of color.

Changing the name and deleting plantation is significant because it has a negative connotation that sheds light on a dark history of America. A history that enslaved people against their will and encouraged brutality toward humanity. The results of a plantation environment created and encouraged disruption and separation of families, brutal beatings, rape and oppression that has led to generational injustice.
Every time black and brown people see or hear "and Providence Plantations" they are reminded that Rhode Island has a long and painful history of involvement in slavery and the slave trade. As we know, there are many stories that tie slavery to Rhode Island's people and institutions long beyond the official "abolition" of slavery in Rhode Island in 1834. This is not just an issue of history from which we can learn. This is a present and daily reminder to us ALL that seemingly small things, such as three words that mean little to some of us, are in fact tremendously hurtful to others of us.

What's in a name? A lot, as it turns out. Let's join together in getting this particular issue behind us. You can visit https://www.change.org/p/gina-raimondo-change-the-official-name-of-rhode-island to sign the petition.

Chontell Washington, Interim Executive Minister

Executive Board

Rhode Island State Council of Churches