

Remembering a historic voyage

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UCC members to help honor freeing of La Amistad slaves in 1839 Though it occurred 164 years ago, the La Amistad incident remains relevant today in light of racial injustices in workplaces, schools and even religious institutions, says a Framingham pastor.

Today, as 10,000 members of the United Church of Christ celebrate the congregation's involvement in setting free 53 Africans illegally sold into slavery in 1839, the Rev. Richard Leavitt of Grace Congregational Church said he hopes members make the connection to their everyday lives.

"Racism has not gone away," said Leavitt. "It's just more polite and subtle, well hidden to mainstream America."

The thousands of UCC members are expected to attend a celebration and worship service on Boston Harbor at the FleetBoston Pavilion.

The UCC is one of the sponsors of a two-week visit to Boston of the Freedom Schooner Amistad, a re-creation of the Spanish vessel made famous in the Steven Spielberg film "Amistad."

Forty members from Grace UCC, and several from the two other Framingham UCC churches, Plymouth and Edwards, will take a bus to the event, which is divided into morning, afternoon and evening sessions.

The celebration, meant to appeal to people of all ages and races, will feature storytellers, gospel singers, multi-church choirs and tours of the ship, which sails from the harbor tomorrow at 5 p.m.

The Freedom Schooner is a floating civil rights museum, and has been seen by 300,000 people since its launch in 2000. The ship is captained by Bill Pinkney, the first African-American and fourth American to sail around the globe solo. Leading up to the ship's arrival, the Massachusetts Conference of the UCC, on Badger Road in Framingham, has sponsored neighborhood conversations on race, and ministers have preached on issues of racism.

The La Amistad incident occurred in 1839, when 53 slaves aboard the ship, led by Mendi tribesman Joseph Cinque, overthrew the crew while sailing off the coast of Cuba.

The slaves, who hailed from what is now the country of Sierra Leone, were captured by the U.S. Navy and imprisoned in New Haven, Conn. But when former President John Quincy Adams, a devout Congregationalist, pleaded their case, the Supreme Court in 1841 set them free.

The Congregationalists, one of the four denominations that joined to form the UCC in 1957, played an important role in securing the slaves' freedom. The church leaders, including Congregationalist minister Joshua Leavitt, an editor of an abolitionist newspaper, hired lawyers, and after securing freedom for the Africans, the church raised money to send the 35 remaining back to their homes.

Congregationalists subsequently founded hundreds of schools and colleges to educate freed blacks in the South following the Civil War.

Leavitt said it makes him proud that his forebears were attuned to issues of racial justice at a time when questioning slavery and the slave trade was not popular. "In some sense, this was one of the most important early acts of the civil rights movements," said the Rev. Paul Thomas of Evangelical Congregational Church in Westborough which is sending a busload of 40 members to today's celebration.

"I'm certainly proud that the churches in New England were a part of that," he added. "The UCC is something of a melting pot. We have so many church traditions represented ... People are being drawn in by a sense of freedom, a positive message, and a challenge, a kind of call to justice."