How do we find the right forum to talk about issues of race within the parish community? St. John’s Stamford, where I served as Rector from 2008-2019, is one of the most economically, ethnically and racially diverse parishes in ECCT. Parishioners at St. John’s see their diversity as a strength and joy. But even given the parish’s diversity it is not always easy to talk about issues of race. As Rector I had wanted to create a forum to wrestle and talk about such issues. And yet every time I suggested having a parish education event or forum to discuss matters of race there was reluctance.

The opportunity for deep discussion I had been looking for came from an unexpected source. Madeline Johnson, our Director of Children and Youth Ministry, offered to show one of her short films at a parish breakfast (Mattie directs and produces short films as her other vocation). ‘Juneteenth’ is a short film about an African American boy who is given a Samurai sword by his aunt for his 13th birthday. His mother is aghast. But while the mother and the aunt argue, the young man and a friend go out to play with the sword. A white bystander calls the police. A white officer draws his gun and yells to the young man who is holding the sword to “drop your weapon.” The film leaves the audience hanging, uncertain of the final outcome.

It is a professionally made and very well done short film that premiered at an international short film festival. But what I found exciting was the discussion afterwards. Every black parent in the room shared about having the talk with their son or daughter. “If you are stopped by the police make sure your hands are where they can be seen at all times. Make no sudden moves...” White parents faced the realization that they never felt their children might be at risk from the police. This put the black lives matter movement in a personal context and highlighted white privilege.
At the same time of highlighting the differences faced by black and brown people and white people, the discussion also drew the parish community closer together in understanding and appreciating one another.

‘Juneteenth’ is a wonderful 8 minute short film. If interested in sharing it with members of your parish contact Madeline Johnson at madeline.m.johnson@gmail.com.

Shared by the Rev. James R. Wheeler

The Episcopal Church in Connecticut (ECCT) entered a “Season of Racial Healing, Justice, and Reconciliation” for a minimum of two years by vote of its Annual Convention in October 2018. Visit episcopalct.org/season-of-racial-healing-justice-and-reconciliation/ to read the enabling resolution and for resources, events, and more. ECCT’s Racial Healing, Justice, and Reconciliation Ministry Network is helping to facilitate much of the resolution’s implementation. Contact the Rev. Rowena Kemp or Suzy Burke, co-conveners of the Ministry Network, at rowjkemp@gmail.com or suzy@alegriaimports.net.