

## Black Lives Matter Rally Speakers Express Common Theme

There was much anticipation from the local community regarding the Black Lives Matter Rally held on Sept. 25<sup>th</sup> at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Monmouth County on West Front Street. In the days leading up to this event, our congregation was shown both support for our efforts in bringing this social injustice to the public's attention and as well as some hostility. The following is an overview of what our intentions were in holding the rally, a brief synopsis of each speaker's remarks, and where we go from here. Thanks to the hard work of Rev. Virginia, Aimee Van Duyne, our Racial Justice Chair and the Racial Justice Task Force the rally was a tremendous success. And thanks to Ben Forest for videotaping the rally, which can be viewed on our UU Congregation of Monmouth County Facebook page.

### What was the intent in hosting a Black Lives Matters Rally?

Rev. Virginia Jarocha-Ernst said, "The intent of the rally is to have a diversity of voices to speak to why this is an important time to be stepping up and working on racial justice."

The idea for the rally, Jarocha-Ernst said, "was an outgrowth from some comments from the congregation who've been looking to have programs promoting racial harmony and understanding. It's about people of faith working together, not to be anti-police, but to work together to make our community safer for everyone."

Here are just a few of the reasons we felt a strong desire to open dialogue surrounding racial justice:

- The harsh reality of recent and not so recent shooting deaths of black men and boys without due process.
- That split second judgement that is made against black skin to shoot to kill rather than apprehend and seek justice.
- The pain that traumatizes the black families and communities leaving them grief stricken and justifiably angry.
- The prison system that is built and funded by our tax dollars to incarcerate and further dehumanize black lives rather than high quality education and healthcare for all.
- Because racism is remarkably resilient. It is ancient and reborn, transforming and traumatizes another generation... and it has to stop.

We wanted to open dialogue, so we can encounter different experiences and world views and learn that not everyone is living in the same United States. This is still not the land of the free if you live in fear every day. We are here so that those of us who are black can be heard. And those of us who are white can witness to their pain and contemplate our privilege in a system of white supremacy none of us chooses. The truth is what happens right now to black bodies is happening to us all. We can only pretend to separate our experiences. We are one human race that is both hurt and hopeful. That coming together like this will make our community stronger, wiser, less

violent and more loving. As people of faith we are moved by a loving god, a universe that bends towards justice and that needs the work of our hands and the opening of hearts to move us toward the good.

### **What was the message delivered by our local community leaders?**

We had a varied guest speaker lineup all with different messages, but all with one common request: to open dialogue. Our tone was set with our UU Singers blessing us with their beautiful voices followed by Rev. Virginia kicking off the event with an introduction. Here is a brief overview of our speakers' messages to a crowd of over 350 attendees.

#### Black Lives Matter Asbury Park Founder- Jennifer Lewinski:

The BLM movement works to affirm black lives and empower black women and men to stand in solidarity. Lewinski stated this movement is not a civil rights movement, but a human rights movement. Societal members should become agents of social change who need to question simple things about racial justice that have been wrongfully taught to us for so many years. She asks that you question our prison system and those that profit off the prison industrial process, question news in regular media and educate yourself on other more reputable sources that give us another angle on what's really going on. Lastly, she requested that we make a point to educate ourselves as to why we (BLM members) are angry and hope you become angry too in the process!

#### Pilgrim Baptist Church - Minister Kerwin Webb:

Attending this event, Pastor Webb reflected on how simple yet complex this issue really is. A few of his thoughts:

- Civil rights movement had happened but everything still isn't ok
- BLM is a coalition of "all people" wanting to see that every life is important
- Black lives are systematically targeted
- BLM is demanding equal recognition and protection as others receive in our community. It is not just about the recent shootings, but about housing, political advancements, just to name a few. He states that this fight doesn't have to be physical that we can choose to use our minds instead.

Let's be part of the solution he suggests, by having a rally such as this, where dialogue can take place, take stock on how life would be different if we made changes, and ask people questions. His main point: intolerance cannot go on.

Bill Dangler - Greater Long Branch NAACP:

It has been too long that we have waited for social justice; we've seen justice is uneven. America doesn't like civil unrest, but sometimes it's needed to wake us up and bring us back to where we need to be. His solution is to get together like we did at the rally and have honest conversation with ourselves and each other.

Holmdel Community Church UCC - Rev. Rusty Eidman Hicks:

Similar to Bill Dangler, Rev Eidman Hicks suggested the continuation of dialogue is the answer to what is right and wrong with white privilege. We should focus on this instead of finger pointing. It isn't about polarizing the issues but equal treatment for all, which isn't being seen currently.

The Anti-Hunger Project of Trinity Episcopal Church, Asbury Park - Derek Minno Bloom:

He started off by acknowledging "all lives matter" and took it a step further to share that he sees a food justice connection issue that falls in line with the black lives matter movement. He sees the hungriest within our communities are the indigenous and black folks and he views it as a systematic problem. An injustice anywhere is an injustice everywhere!

Racial Justice Project of Asbury Park - Liza Minno Bloom:

Liza reiterated many of the same key points being driven by the other speakers, but went a step further and gave concrete solutions to these inequalities. Here are a few areas in which she felt we could move people:

- Help resource black lives movements. These organizations need space and time and we as the "privileged white" can use our connections to move money to fund these movements or do our part in a nonfinancial way
- Donate to [movementforblacklives.org](http://movementforblacklives.org)
- Follow black leadership to view their comprehensive plans for food, housing and tap into these visionaries and plug into their campaigns in any way you can
- Transform our ideas as to who should be in leadership
- Don't wait to be asked to do something; your action is needed
- Have uncomfortable conversations and engage
- Develop your own stake in black liberation because it will benefit your own human stake in the end

Craig Weber, Chief of Police, Middletown NJ:

We couldn't have been more thrilled by the acceptance to speak at this rally, without hesitation, by Chief Craig Weber. He brought a different perspective to this rally by sharing how the tragedies of 9/11 was a shared connection of all people, of all races, and ethnicity as it was an attack on all of humanity. Unlike 9/11, the issue surrounding race inequalities is a divisive one and that we need to acknowledge this if we want to make a change. How can this change occur? By engaging in community outreach with religious and civic leaders, by breaking down barriers of mistrust and build relationships of mutual respect and understanding. He understands that it is difficult to accept different point of view, but adds that we must pause and reflect before we react and resist in becoming defensive or opposing to different points of view. Dialogue of mutual respect along with conflict resolution is the way to move forward. Chief of Police Weber highlighted several local relationship building programs that the Middletown police are currently engaged in.

After the rally, Rev Virginia sent this letter to all involved with this rally and it summarizes what this rally set out to do which was to open up dialogue in a peaceful, respectful manner. Strangers and friends of many races and religions came together to make connections, to continue on with this very important work and to engage in more discussions in the near future.

*A portion of Rev. Virginia's letter to the speakers and organizers:*

*To all the wonderful speakers and musicians at Sunday's rally,*

*Thank you so much for being present and speaking your powerful truths so beautifully to 350 area residents. I am so moved by your words and music, stories and experiences and by the fact that our community showed up and made many new connections. The whole event was respectful and hope-filled.*

*I am especially grateful for the support of the Middletown Police and Craig Weber's willingness to be part of the dialogue. This collaboration is everything I could hope for and proves that we need not be polarized.*

*While I know there is still much more work to do, I am grateful that we have begun! Please do stay in touch. Let's think together of ways we can continue and expand our dialog. Feel free to share this link of video of the rally [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uXG6m46G4tA&feature=em-share\\_video\\_user](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uXG6m46G4tA&feature=em-share_video_user). Thanks to Ben Forest of UUCMC, folks who could not attend can watch the whole event there.*

*Yours in faith...Rev Virginia*