

“Black Lives Matter”: The Movement and the Church’s Needed Response(s):

A Presentation for World Methodist Council Participants

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Background

In the words of Alicia Garza, one of the three founders of Black Lives Matter:

I created #BlackLivesMatter with Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi, two of my sisters, as a call to action for Black people after 17-year-old Trayvon Martin was post-humously placed on trial for his own murder and the killer, George Zimmerman, was not held accountable for the crime he committed. It was a response to the anti-Black racism that permeates our society and also, unfortunately, our movements.

Black Lives Matter is an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise. It is an affirmation of Black folks’ contributions to this society, our humanity, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression.”¹

Rise to Prominence

On August 9, 2013, Mr. Michael Brown, Jr. was shot and killed in Ferguson, Missouri, by Officer Darren Wilson. **Brown’s body** lay in the street for more than four hours before his body was moved. As Brown’s body lay in the street, young people began flocking to the scene and persons with cell phone cameras began to post real-time photos and live video footage of witnesses who were reporting that Brown was unarmed with his hands up when he was shot.

As a means of showing solidarity across social media platforms, activists and protestors began using the hashtag #blacklivesmatter.

¹ www.blacklivesmatter.org (Our Herstory)

Although, as I shared earlier, the Black Lives Matter organization was founded a year prior, in response to the Trayvon Martin crisis [Martin was killed Feb. 26, 2012], the power of social media caused the hashtag to take root and spread rapidly in response to Michael Brown's death and the subsequent deaths of others.

While the official organization (though a decentralized organization) came to play an integral and active role in sustaining the work at Ferguson and other places across the country – and while its name was being used as a hashtag – it is important to note that the organization holds it was not responsible for the initial responses in Ferguson to police violence on August 13th.

When hearing Black Lives Matter, few differentiate the work of the organization from the common (and biased) media representations of those who took up the chant in protests. Most came to think of the phrase as being synonymous with angry young Black people who were destructive and disruptive to the lives of other every day citizens.

I suggest here that among those of us who represent the Church, the most pressing questions about the Black Lives Matter Movement have centered around issues of purpose, philosophy, structure, and strategy. For many in the Church, purpose and philosophy of organizations have been used as justification to stay away or support “from a distance.” Moreover, we in the Church tend to “wait and weigh and see ‘if’” an organization merits our support before we “jump in.” I know this is true of my vantage point (Lawrence Reddick, speaking). But it is also true that this “wait and weigh and see ‘if’” stance has caused the Church to be absent in crises or to alienate itself from persons who step ahead of us to develop and press forward what becomes a serious Movement.

In regard to Black Lives Matter, it seems unfortunate that too few of us have made it a priority to look more closely and to study in earnest the work and the lived experiences of those who proudly proclaim #blacklivesmatter.

While protests and “shut-downs” quickly became the “face” of the Black Lives Matter Movement in the aftermath of Michael Brown's death, the Movement should not be taken at “face-value” or dismissed as the unnecessary expressions and actions of “those” angry Black people. To

dismiss or demean what developed in Ferguson and beyond would be (1) to ignore the treacherous and sinister nuances of the racism that systemically exists in the United States and in the World, (2) to miss the intricate and complex systems of communication that were quickly established in Ferguson that were, even now, difficult to decipher from the outside, and (3) to negate the incredible sense of “community” – what many have called the greatest phenomenon of the Movement – a “community” that grew from its ranks “out” or “up”; i.e., not from the “top down.”

In the days after the killing of Michael Brown in August 2013, young people converged on Ferguson, lived with each other, shared meals, split bills, developed strategies that the media would never cover and perhaps not know of, and in this sharing a sense of community developed which spread its influence into Baltimore, Maryland (after the death of Freddie Gray), into Cleveland, Ohio (after the shooting of 12-year-old Tamir Rice), into Charleston, South Carolina (after the death of Walter Scott and the subsequent killings in Mother Emmanuel A.M.E. Church), into Prairie View, Texas (following the death of Sandra Bland), and in other places across the United States.

When many persons (especially those of us in faith communities who remember the “Civil Rights Movement” of the 20th Century), continued to declare that the Movement needed a “leader,” a “strategy,” or “structure” in order to sustain its work, the protest community maintained its belief that a decentralized movement with many leaders was the only way. In this way, the Movement would not be dependent on one voice for its existence.

Black Lives Matter should not be demeaned or denigrated as the chant of angry, unorganized, destructive young Black people. Rather, it should be seen as the way that a present generation of persons courageous enough to protest have chosen to acknowledge and name their pains and their enemies while fighting for and claiming their rights to healing.

Why Not “All Lives Matter”?

Perhaps even now, as we hear this, many among us are asking, “But don't all lives matter?!” Yes, all lives matter. And in a perfect world, this would be a reasonable response. But to respond to “Black Lives Matter” by

countering with “All Lives Matter” is to erase a message that must be ... must be ... heard – the message of systematic and intentional injustice toward Black persons.

A contemporary blogger on social media wrote this way:

Imagine that you’re sitting down to dinner with your family, and while everyone else gets a serving of the meal, you don’t get any. So you say “I should get my fair share.” And as a direct response to this, your dad corrects you, saying, “*everyone* should get their fair share.” Now, that’s a wonderful sentiment — indeed, everyone should, and that was kinda your point in the first place: that you should be a part of everyone, and you should get your fair share *also*. However, dad’s [expletive deleted] comment just dismissed you and didn’t solve the problem that you still haven’t gotten any!

The problem is that the statement “I should get my fair share” had an implicit “too” at the end: “I should get my fair share, too, just like everyone else.” But your dad’s response treated your statement as though you meant “*only* I should get my fair share,” which clearly was not your intention. As a result, his statement that “everyone should get their fair share,” while true, only served to ignore the problem you were trying to point out.

That’s the situation of the “black lives matter” movement. Culture, laws, the arts, religion, and everyone else repeatedly suggest that all lives should matter. Clearly, that message already abounds in our society.

...

Just like asking dad for your fair share, the phrase “black lives matter” also has an implicit “too” at the end: it’s saying that black lives should *also* matter. But responding to this by saying “*all* lives matter” is willfully going back to ignoring the problem. It’s a way of dismissing the statement by falsely suggesting that it means “*only* black lives matter,” when that is obviously not the case. And so saying “all lives matter” as a *direct response* to “black lives matter” is essentially saying that we should just go back to ignoring the problem.²

How Should the Church Respond?

As we seek to understand Black Lives Matter and how we as the Church are called to respond to this mantra, we must understand first that

² <http://fusion.net/story/170591/the-next-time-someone-says-all-lives-matter-show-them-these-5-paragraphs/>

when these activists say BlackLivesMatter, they are speaking to more than police brutality and state violence. Instead, they see themselves as “broadening the conversation around state violence to include all of the ways in which Black people are intentionally left powerless at the hands of the state. We are talking about the ways in which Black lives are deprived of our basic human rights and dignity.”³

Moreover, as the BlackLivesMatter webpage’s section on *Guiding Principles* points out, “Black Lives Matter is an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise.”⁴ This and the previous quote that broadens the conversation beyond police brutality and state violence to include “all of the ways in which Black people are intentionally left powerless” are the heart and soul of BlackLivesMatter, and it is to these principles that the Church should respond.

However, those of us of the United States who remember and laud the prophetic roles of some persons in Church leadership during the Civil Rights Movement of the 20th Century are prone to think as we did (or say we did) at that time – in terms of strategy and in terms of structure. And in this remembrance, many of us long to give this Movement more structure and support it with our concepts of strategy. But we must remember that this Movement is not *our* Movement – we did not start it and we cannot get ahead of it and try to lead it.

We believe the ways in which we must respond are (1) to observe and listen and learn from the authentic BlackLivesMatter voices (whether they speak like we want them to speak or not); (2) to hear their voices with a commitment to do so without being judgmental and/or critical before prayerful consideration of the truths they are speaking; (3) to acknowledge in repentance that we, too, as institutional Church, are consider “untrusted” as organizations which have too often opted for power over prophecy, for a visit to the White House over ministry in the jailhouse, for privilege for ourselves rather than presence among the marginalized; (4) to provide safe spaces for them to be heard, remembering that many of “them” are “us” and acknowledging that this Movement is a movement of God’s children

³ www.blacklivesmatter.org (About Us)

⁴ www.blacklivesmatter.org (Guiding Principles)

seeking justice; and (5) to continuously discern the kind of Gospel our presence or our absence from this Movement is proclaiming.

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