



WOODBURY UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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Rev. John A. Thomason, Pastor

The Life of the Church

by Pastor John

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Dear Church Family,

When the COVID-19 pandemic started, several of our youth created and placed yard signs along the Main Street side of our building in support of “frontliners” and essential workers. A few weeks later, when rallies began across the street on the North Green to protest systemic racism, some of those same youth added signs to our picket fence in support of the Black community.

Legitimate questions have been raised by some church members and community neighbors about the appropriateness of these signs on our church property. This feedback was very helpful, because it enlarged my understanding of how a variety of people have perceived the signs and what they might indicate about our Christian witness. It also gives me the opportunity to share how those signs originated and for what purpose they were intended.

In creating the signs, our young people obviously chose slogans associated with the wider protest movement – slogans which are subject to varying interpretations. For some, the slogan “Black Lives Matter” is identified with an organization which has radical origins and membership. For others, “Black Lives Matter” is simply a message affirming the worth of people of color. I can assure you that the signs on our church property are in no way an endorsement of anarchist or Marxist groups. The youth who made the signs, and the adults in our church (including me) who share their sentiment, are endorsing a message of full acceptance, equality, and justice for Black people. We also advocate social change only through non-violent methods. We remain fully supportive of law enforcement officers who put their own lives on the line to keep the peace and provide safety for others.

The use of the slogan “Black Lives Matter” has elicited the counter-protest that all lives matter. Indeed they do! All lives certainly mattered to Jesus, who loved others indiscriminately and unconditionally. However, Jesus paid special attention to persons and groups who were discounted and dismissed by the dominant majority – sinners in general; and Gentiles, Samaritans, and Roman collaborators (e.g., Zacchaeus) in particular. He made a point of saying that their lives matter because others were saying that they don’t matter.

It is for this reason and in this spirit that I affirm “Black Lives Matter.” For me and for many others, it’s just another way of saying that Black people have the same value as all other people and deserve to be treated accordingly. I regret that the movement associated with this slogan has been tarnished by fringe elements who undermine democracy and promote violence. But, at the same time, I believe that the vast majority of people who have taken to the streets in recent weeks

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are peace-loving and simply want justice for all of God's children. The remarkable thing about the 2020 movement is that it is so much more broad-based than the civil rights movement of the 1960's. White people like myself and many of our church members have finally said "Enough!" and joined forces with people of color to right the wrongs of the past.

Advocating for social justice is an indispensable part of our United Methodist heritage. For example, Methodists were at the forefront of the abolitionist and suffrage movements. It is significant that the same space we are using for outdoor worship on Sunday mornings is also being used by advocates for racial equality on Sunday afternoons. Our concerns and their concerns clearly overlap – or at least they should.

Still, some questions about "message" signs on church property remain unanswered. The signs deploring racism were produced and displayed spontaneously in a moment of social passion. Should our church have a policy to govern the placement of message signs – i.e., what messages are appropriate, and how and by whom is this decided? The Church Council will address these questions at their August meeting. In the meantime, we welcome your passion, your perspective, and your thoughtful input about how WUMC can best handle these complex situations in the future.

Grace and peace,
John