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The Congregational Newsletter of the First Unitarian Universalist Society of Burlington
February 2018

Acting for Justice: Reflections on the Black Lives Matter Banner

Pastoral Message from Rev. Mara

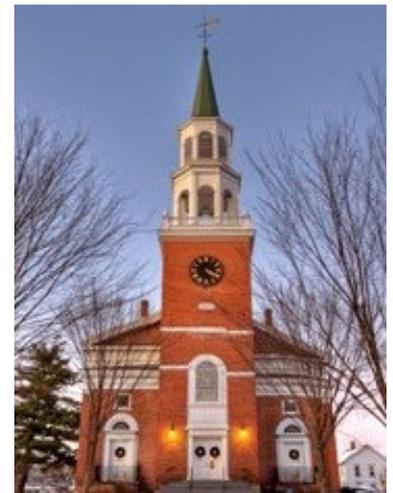
Dear friends,

In the coming week, our Society will join the more than 160 other UU congregations across the country that have expressed their commitment to racial justice and dismantling white supremacy by raising a Black Lives Matter banner in front of our iconic Meeting House. When the yellow and black banner, bearing the heart that signifies our sacred UU commitment to *Side with Love*, takes its place on the front lawn of the Meeting House, it will be a powerful public witness and an embodiment of FUUSB's core value of love, our mission to act for justice, and our visionary goal of using FUUSB's power as a faith community to work for social justice in our world.

In one sense, the raising of the Black Lives Matter banner is an action that is deeply *of this moment*. The banner and its words speak solidarity with one of the core grassroots social justice movements of our time. And the timing of our banner's unveiling, just a few weeks after Montpelier and Burlington high schools raised their BLM flags, also allows us – serendipitously – to show our support for the courageous youth of color, who have identified the flags as helping them feel *seen* and *valued* in our communities. Like rainbow pride flags raised a generation ago to signal welcome and affirmation to the LGBTQ community, the Black Lives Matter banner has become, for this era, a powerful symbol of valuing people of color in our communities and recommitting to ending racism.

In another sense, though, placing a Black Lives Matter banner on the Society's lawn can also be seen as a single chapter in the longer story of this Society embracing its role as a beacon for love and justice in the world. First UU has a proud history of raising banners about the crucial moral issues of its day, but its work to bend the moral arc of the universe toward justice has not been limited to our Meeting House grounds: Members and leaders of this Society have

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carried the fire of commitment out into the world in countless ways through the decades. FUUSB's collective light has shone in committee hearings at the State House on Marriage Equality, and at rallies in City Hall Park to oppose racism and support our immigrant and refugee neighbors. It has beamed out at Pride Parades up Church Street, and on the Climate March through the streets of New York City. It glows weekly at our Love and Justice Vigils, and daily when FUUSB members of all ages act out of love and on behalf of justice in their individual lives.

Like any act of public witness and befitting the multiplicity of outlooks and life experiences present in any UU congregation, your justice lay leaders and I recognize the rich complexity of feelings alive in our community as we move ahead with the banner.

Though the banner discernment process surfaced strong support in the community for raising it, we also heard worry expressed about the potential for acts of vandalism on our property as a result and the potential for our message to be maligned or misunderstood. Some have said they would prefer a racial justice banner with different words. Others are bursting with excitement and pride. Still others are frustrated we didn't get one up sooner.

As the banner installation approaches, we are also mindful that, along with being a beacon, our Meeting House is likewise a sanctuary, where we come to feel held, nourished, safe and filled up on a weekly basis. For some of us, the presence of the banner might enhance that feeling of sanctuary, by signaling an additional layer of welcome. For others, the banner's potential to bring vandalism or messages of hate to our spiritual home might challenge that feeling of sanctuary. As your minister, I want you to know that I see and hold all of these potential feelings in the light of compassion. And I bear witness

to both the potential synergy and the potential tension between the congregation's role as a moral beacon and its role as a refuge. And for those who may be feeling an added layer of personal vulnerability in light of this public witness, please know that the ministerial staff is here for you. Our intern, Andre Mol, trained members of our Care Network, and I are all available to offer spiritual support for whatever feelings are coming up around the banner.

We also want you to know that the Racial Justice Task Force and staff have been working behind the scenes to prepare in advance for potential vandalism, to attend to safety concerns, and to communicate with community stakeholders and partners. (We have already received caring and supportive words about the banner from our friends at the Church Street Marketplace). And we have been in touch with and learned a lot from sister congregations and our larger UU Association, who have much wisdom to share from their experiences raising banners. There are many to whom we can turn should we need additional information or support in the weeks ahead.

I want to thank the many leaders and members who have worked tirelessly on this ministry effort in the past few months: our Racial Justice Task Force Co-Chairs, Gabriel Ely and Jud Lawrie; Justice and Outreach Lay Lead, Zoe Hart; the Banner Implementation team (Gabriel, Zoe, Generose Lambert, and Martha Molpus); the entire Racial Justice Task Force; the leaders and members of FUUSB's earlier racial justice ministry efforts, including David Clark, Kathleen Kemp, Monica Sargent and Susan Schoenfeld. And we want to thank all those who have attended Task Force events and participated in our banner discernment in some way.

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As we embark on this act of public witness together, may we be comforted by the words of Minister Emeritus Rev. Gary Kowalski, who reminds us to “be guided by our faith and not our fear.” And may we find inspiration in the words of Ella Baker, who reminds us that “we who believe in freedom cannot rest.” So may it be.

With love and gratitude,

Rev. Mara



Reflections on the Black Lives Matter Banner

Generose Lambert, Racial Justice Task Force member

Hello Friends,

On February 25, when we raise a Black Lives Matter banner, we will affirm our UU commitment to honor the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

By raising the Black Lives Matter banner, we are following on the leadership of our local young people who courageously advocated to raise the Black Lives Matter banner at Montpelier High School and Burlington High School.

By raising the Black Lives Matter banner, we demonstrate solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement, acknowledging that all lives matter as put

forth in our First Principle *and* also witnessing that, in so many ways in our society’s institutions and broader culture, people of color in general, and Americans of African descent in particular, have not yet been included in the idea of ‘all lives.’

Solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement means opposing the burgeoning public display of white supremacy and active engagement in recruiting tactics emboldened by the current political climate. Here in our own community, recently we have seen UVM targeted with vandalism and fascist fliers. Demonstrators on Church Street in downtown Burlington carried racist ‘blood and soil’ banners. A few weeks ago, many of us answered a call from local organizers and joined with anti-racist groups in a counter rally in opposition to the rally planned by the fascist organization Patriot Front at the Staples center in South Burlington.

In our ongoing work, our FUUSB Racial Justice Task Force has prioritized supporting the efforts of people-of-color led organizations in our community and in our UU movement. For those of us who are white folks doing the work of racial justice, our role as allies often involves decentering ourselves to make room for the leadership and voices of people of color. Heather Cronk, a former leader of [Showing Up for Racial Justice](#) (SURJ), a national network of groups and individuals that organizes white people in the fight for racial justice, articulates this well in a December 7, 2016 article: <https://mic.com/articles/161214/how-to-support-the-black-lives-matter-movement-as-a-white-ally#.hdqTnJxpB>.

Finally, we know that the raising of the banner, while an important act of public witness, is not the end of our work for racial justice. We hope you will stay tuned for further opportunities to engage in education and action as part of our FUUSB community in the weeks and months ahead.

Raising the Banner: So How Did We Decide to Do That Anyway?

Gabriel Ely, Racial Justice Task Force Co-Chair, and Rev. Mara, Senior Minister

Last August, our FUUSB Racial Justice Task Force proposed that, as part of our commitment to racial justice, we “take a position in support of the broader Black Lives Matter movement and bear public witness to that support by hanging a banner and actively supporting local racial justice organizations led by people of color.” The Racial Justice Task Force is our lay ministry team which carries out and creates opportunities for FUUSB members to act for racial justice. The team is comprised of about a dozen active First UU members (some long timers and some newer folks), and it carries out its mission with the guidance and support of Rev. Mara and Zoe Hart, our Justice and Outreach Lay Lead.

The idea of raising a banner had first been floated a few years ago, when our Racial Justice Task Force was forming. While the Task Force leadership was excited about the prospect, it wanted to first focus its efforts on reinvigorating the congregation’s racial justice work with a series of education activities. But by last summer, the team felt ready to move ahead with a banner proposal in earnest. So, over the course of the fall, the task force engaged in a discernment process with the larger congregation, that included a series of six open discussion forums. At these fall gatherings, the team heard your related excitements, wonderings and also some worries about raising a BLM banner. In the months since, the task force reflected on the sum of this input, explored other UU congregations’ experiences with BLM banners, and identified ways of addressing concerns raised about vandalism and safety.

Based on all of this congregational input, research and reflection, the team proposed that we join the more than 160 other UU congregations around the country who have raised Black Lives Matter banners.

FUUSB has a proud tradition of raising banners on crucial justice issues of the day and having heard strong support from the larger congregation to express our commitment to racial justice through a BLM banner, last month, the team felt ready to move ahead. We view the lawn banner as a powerful and timely embodiment of FUUSB’s mission to act for justice and as fulfilling our visionary end of justice and outreach ministry. The Executive Team (Rev. Mara and Christina Fulton, our Director of Operations) and our Justice and Outreach Lay Lead, Zoe Hart, signed off on the plan, and Rev. Mara informed our Board of Trustees.

Some of you have wondered why we didn’t have a congregational vote on whether to put up the banner. There are a few parts to this answer. First, the team learned that UU congregations have followed all kinds of processes to decide about banners. Second, in examining our own congregational precedent, we discovered FUUSB has not before voted on the question of whether to put up a banner. The congregation *has* voted to support particular public policies such as Marriage Equality, and congregational input has been sought about the wording of some banners in the past, such as our Economic Justice Banner a few years ago. But in neither case was there a vote on whether to do a banner. In other cases, in the past, banners on various issues were simply raised by the minister.

Within the Racial Justice Task Force, the conversation about the appropriateness of voting on whether to raise a racial justice banner was deeply influenced by the work of Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed, a UU minister who has researched and written extensively on the history and experience of Black Unitarian Universalists. In *Darkening the Doorways*,

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Raising the Banner

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he describes the 1963 General Assembly (GA) debate over an amendment to the Unitarian Universalist Association constitution that would require all member congregations to “maintain a policy of admitting persons to membership without discrimination of race, color, or national origin.”

The amendment ultimately failed because some felt it conflicted with congregation polity – the absolute authority of the individual congregations to determine all matters concerning their governance. Mark Morrison-Reed cited this as an example of prioritizing one UU value – congregational polity – at the expense of another – human rights, concluding the assembly erred on the wrong side in that instance. Mark Morrison-Reed and others have argued that, in our UU movement, it has too often been our values of racial justice and human rights that have had to comprise. This insight was powerful for the Racial Justice Task Force members, and one they want to bring to our larger congregation as an important lens for discernment on other important issues in the future, where many UU values are at stake.

If you have further questions about the process for moving ahead with the banner, please feel free to reach out to us. We welcome hearing from you!



From the Stewardship Team

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By Todd Clason

It all starts with a story. Two hundred years ago, a group of people with deep, mutually held ideals worked to see a meeting house erected and made manifest an ongoing commitment to themselves, to each other, and to their larger community. We are part of this story, and carry important, core beliefs forward.

As I sat with the Stewardship Team several nights ago, talking about the practical considerations of our Society’s financial health, I felt a pull of something less tangible, but nonetheless very strong, urging me to pay attention. What I was feeling was a powerful need, to feel welcomed, to feel useful, to be among people who share a commitment to justice, dignity, peace, and spiritual connection.

Our congregation, our meeting house, our ideals have persevered through decades, through difficult times, through trials both very personal and widely social. We persevere because what we do is very important. At this moment in time, perhaps more than ever before, we hold a rare space that actively considers how we may lead a moral life, how we may be in right relation with ourselves and our community, how we may find lasting meaning in our lives. Over time, I have begun to take this work as much more central and important than I ever imagined it to be. I have also found very little room for it in modern life.

Supporting the First Unitarian Universalist Society of Burlington is not something I do as a discretionary financial choice. I support our Society because for me, the work we do is of primary importance. In the coming weeks, the Stewardship Team will help us understand the real, practical needs and financial goals of our Society. I will act from my heart, knowing I have a part to play in this story of perseverance, and acknowledging my own deep needs.

Moving Ahead with Family Ministry

By Andrea Spencer-Linzie, Developmental Director of Family Ministry



To begin, I share with you an exciting vision for our purpose as Unitarian Universalists. Natalie Briscoe, Congregational Life Field Staff for the UUA serving the Southern Region, writes in her article, "Look for the Un-builders": **"The purpose of the**

church is to be the institutional incarnation of Love on earth."

Wow! What an inspirational way to think of "church."

Our purpose is to incarnate love through worship, through compassion and pastoral care, through social justice, community service, learning, covenantal community, and more.

This sense of embodied love and relationship is at the center of a model of Family Ministry that I learned about in a week-long workshop this past January at the UU Ministerial Alliance Institute in Florida.

There is way more information that I learned at the workshop than I can include in this article. I am happy to share with you that I am inspired by the ideas and goals of this program. The FUUSB Religious Education program already reflects many of the key components of a Family Ministry model.

There is a lot of energy in the UU RE system nationally about focusing on Family Ministry as a cross-generational process to embody our core values of love, justice, peace, compassion. This cross-generational relationship building occurs in worship, over a meal, at home with children and parents, during a rally, in a class. At the core of Family Ministry is relationship building. And from our

relationships, in families, at church, with the community, we are what we do -- incarnated love.

The principles at the core of this Family Ministry model are:

- Learn from the past
- Move from "I" to "We"
- Mi Casa is su Casa – or, "A Spirit of Generosity"

The Religious Education Team, in collaboration with me and other RE staff, will be considering how we may vision the future of Family Ministry here in FUUSB, in the context of the vision for the congregation. As one person said at the workshop, if you pull on Religious Education, you get a pull on everything in the congregation.

There are already printed compilations of feedback regarding the FUUSB Religious Education Program that we will be reviewing. We will likely be soliciting more over the next year and a half, as we develop together the vision for the near and far future.

The next immediate step is to schedule a "Start-Up" in March for me as the new Developmental Director of Family Ministry. Joe Sullivan from the New England Regional Staff will be facilitating and we will be talking about Family Ministry at FUUSB.



Building Community Through the Care Network

Testimonials from Sally Russell and Mary Silverman

One of the valuable organizations within FUUSB is our Care Network. We provide a variety of services to members and friends including participating in the Mealtrain (www.mealtrain.com/uusociety).

I joined the Care Network in 2017 and one of the side benefits of delivering a meal, or cleaning for someone is that we get to know each other better and we develop a friendship. It is not just about someone being in need, it is about hearing someone's story and sharing yours. It is about venting in regards to our political climate or departure of our Senior Minister. Just like part of our church service is to turn to our neighbor and introduce ourselves, delivering a meal or visiting someone is the same. It is about intentionally creating a warm and caring community and seizing the opportunity to share our stories.

When I first joined a UU church 24 years ago I was not sure about why I had joined, since I had grown up unchurched. Eighteen months later when my father died suddenly, I was so held by that community that I had only known for 1.5 years. I received cards and thoughts from people I barely knew. I called a group and they came to rake my leaves which was a task I could not get to. Seven of us who had lost parents recently formed a grief group which met for two years to process our grief. I realized during that experience why I will always belong to a UU community. It is to share my joys and sorrows, and be there when someone needs me. It is knowing that people will be there for me when I need them.

- Sally Russell



Members of the Care Network Team were asked to share why we participated in the Care Network. It wasn't the first time I'd been asked that. Several years ago, while visiting and enjoying a wonderful conversation with a member of our congregation, she asked, "Why do you visit people?" The answer blurted out of my mouth. "Because I can!"

Both the spontaneity and the strength of the conviction took me by surprise, but as I thought about it for a while, I realized it came from a deep place within me.

She knew my history of being very sick with cancer and six months of chemotherapy. At that low period in my life, friends, family, and members of this congregation visited and brought meals to me and my husband. This outpouring of caring meant a great deal to me and taught me the immense power that a caring community has on the wellbeing of someone who is suffering.

Now that I have healed from that ordeal, I am thankful for the wellness to be able to show others "I care." I encourage members of this congregation to consider joining the Care Network's mission of "caring for others," either by visiting or making and delivering meals.

- Mary Silverman



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**Daylight Saving Time
Reminder**

Remember to set your
clocks *forward* one hour on
Saturday night, **March 10!**

Daylight saving time starts at 2 a.m. on
Sunday, March 11.



The Steeple
Publication Schedule Update

Please note that the next issue of
The Steeple will be published in April. The
deadline to submit articles is **March 26**.

If you are interested in writing an article
for *The Steeple*, please email
newsletter@uusociety.org
with any questions.