

Update from The Vestry

Re: The Black Lives Matter Sign

On July 10, approximately 60 members of our parish family gathered with the Vestry in the Undercroft to discuss the future of having the Black Lives Matter (BLM) sign on the front lawn of the church. There was a wide range of shared viewpoints. These viewpoints have been the prayerful center of the Vestry's discussions these past five weeks.

What was revealed in that open and non-judgmental discussion on July 10 was that there are deeper issues of concern regarding social and racial justice in our parish, our community, and in our world. We heard that many of us have significant emotional and spiritual feelings about the concern for equality.

The social and racial injustices of the past 400 years (since the first African slaves were brought to our shores in 1619 at Fort Comfort, Virginia*) must be called to truth, to recognize that much of the success and wealth enjoyed by many in present day America was paid for on the backs of these first slaves and other slaves who followed them. However, present day family members of many of these slaves continue to struggle to enjoy the benefits of the economic and privileged foundation that they helped to build. It is true that we of the present day did not create these layers of inequality but that, without awareness, we have perpetuated the injustices created by our ancestors. It is clear that those who are not people of color are the people who continue to more fully enjoy the benefits of today's America.

The centerpiece of this discussion is much more than a BLM sign. It is about social and racial injustices beginning with Native Americans and continuing with African slaves and other marginalized groups that cannot access the elusive "American Dream." By acknowledging this inequality and injustice, we, as a parish family of faith, have a chance to publically take a stand while seeking forgiveness for past wounds and reconciliation for a healed and inclusive future.

The Vestry has prayerfully considered key points raised and feels a forward motion on several points:

- a. The BLM sign will continue to be displayed on the front lawn. The sign has helped to create a conversation toward a deeper discussion with the parish going forward toward the development of a mission and action plan for the parish.

b. Examples of companion signs or banners will be circulated among the Vestry members to find consensus on one that is inclusive, may include lines of scripture, and speaks of kindness and love. It was felt that an “All Lives Matter” sign fell short of what we wish to proclaim. The Vestry will make a choice and place this companion sign or banner along with the BLM sign. This is meant to be a conditional/temporary sign/banner until, as a parish, we may create our own sign that proclaims who we are based on a mission statement.

c. The Vestry will develop an inclusive format for ALL parish members who wish to participate in the creation of a St. Michael’s Episcopal Church Mission Statement. We will begin this conversation in the late winter and early spring. We look to create a statement that reflects what we stand for in a scripture-based way and to which we are committed regarding social and racial injustice in this country. This statement will guide us in prayer, community outreach, educational engagement, and non-violent action. This statement will proclaim the Christ-like life that we seek, not just within our individual selves but also in our community.

Here are several questions to pray about in anticipation of the process to building our mission statement:

- What do we proclaim?
- What are our values?
- For what do we stand?
- As Christians, how do we feel called to manifest this stand for our parish family and our larger community?

What we proclaim may find us in a place that is uncomfortable. Some may feel that we are using politics to form our decisions. After lengthy Vestry discussions, it is very clearly a question of how to proclaim our beliefs in a scriptural way. As C. S. Lewis said, “If you are looking for a religion to make you comfortable, don’t look to Christianity.”

We look to be more public about what we believe by inclusion in the weekly Sunday Services section of the Reformer, an article in the Commons, and services in public spaces (recalling our summer of church services in the downtown River Garden). These actions are ways to more visibly open our hearts and minds to people who also resonate with our witness that they, too, may come and join with our voices.

In faith, Carolyn Taylor-Olson, Senior Warden for the Vestry

**(from the NYT Magazine) “The 1619 Project is a major initiative from the New York Times observing the 400th anniversary of the beginning of American slavery. It aims to reframe the country’s history, understanding 1619 as our true founding, and placing the consequences of slavery and the contributions of black Americans at the very center of the story we tell ourselves about who we are.”*