

InterVarsity leaders back Black Lives Matter efforts during student conference

by [Tobin Grant](#) in the [February 3, 2016](#) issue

InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, an evangelical college ministry, issued a call to support the Black Lives Matter movement at its yearly student missions conference.

In the United States, more than 41,000 college students are involved in InterVarsity chapters. Since the 1940s, InterVarsity's Urbana missions conference has brought together thousands of its students for four days of seminars, worship services, and meetings.

While the name of the conference still refers to its longtime location at the University of Illinois, the conference is now held in St. Louis—13 miles from Ferguson, Missouri.

Given that location, as well as InterVarsity's commitment to both social justice and the diversity of its students (more than a third are ethnic or racial minorities), it was not surprising that there was some mention of racial inequality. But InterVarsity went further.

The first sign was the worship team. Its members wore Black Lives Matter T-shirts and sang gospel songs. Then Michelle Higgins took to the stage. Higgins directs Faith for Justice, a Christian advocacy group in St. Louis (she also serves as worship director at South City Church). She's active in the Black Lives Matter movement in the St. Louis area, and she challenged the students to listen to the stories of the movement and get involved.

She noted that Christians have been willing to be political activists on issues such as abortion but not on issues such as racism and inequality.

"Black Lives Matter is not a mission of hate," she said. "Black Lives Matter is a movement on mission in the truth of God."

Higgins concluded by leading the students in call and response of the Black Lives Matter chant: "I believe that we will win!"

InterVarsity's move to embrace Black Lives Matter builds on decades of multiethnic and multiracial work. InterVarsity began in the 1940s as an integrated ministry that officially rejected racism. After a couple hundred black students at the 1967 Urbana meeting called for further action by InterVarsity, the organization made reforms.

One of the responses by InterVarsity was to invite Tom Skinner (1942-1994) to Urbana '70. Skinner's sermon laying out the history of racism in America and evangelical churches' complicity still echoes within InterVarsity.

Skinner told the students at Urbana '70 that during segregation, "the evangelical, Bible-believing, fundamental, orthodox, conservative church in this country was strangely silent." The churches, Skinner said, supported the status quo on slavery, segregation, and civil rights.

Skinner's message came after the early battles of the civil rights movement. During the 1950s and 1960s, evangelicals, even when they opposed segregation, stayed clear of joining the civil rights movement.

InterVarsity released a statement about its action regarding the Black Lives Matter movement on December 31, the last day of the Urbana conference, where half of the participants were people of color, the organization reported.

"InterVarsity does not endorse everything attributed to #BlackLivesMatter," the statement said. "For instance, we reject any call to attack or dehumanize police. But—using the language of Francis Schaeffer and Chuck Colson—we are co-belligerents with a movement with which we sometimes disagree because we believe it is important to affirm that God created our black brothers and sisters. They bear his image. They deserve safety, dignity and respect." —Religion News Service; added source

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