

The challenge to Christians: Black Lives Matter symposium

Putting up signs is great. Talking about racism together is even better.

by [Anthea D. Butler](#)

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The Black Lives Matter movement that has unfolded in cities and on campuses across the nation is writing a new chapter in black people's struggle for liberation. We asked writers to reflect on what the movement has accomplished, where its energies should be focused, and what implications it has for churches. (Read [all responses](#).)

Could the Black Lives Matter movement invigorate churches across America? I believe it can, because it reveals the systemic racism that African Americans experience, it bridges the generation gap within the civil rights movement, and it is a marked improvement over the "racial reconciliation" movements of the 1990s which did not push forward the conversation on race or act significantly to eradicate racism.

Like the civil rights movement, Black Lives Matter has attracted not only African Americans but persons from different social, ethnic, and class backgrounds. There are Black Lives Matter chapters located throughout the United States. While it is not a movement rooted in religion per se, it is open to those who believe. It is open and affirming, and unapologetically black. It states that "to love and desire freedom and justice for ourselves is a necessary prerequisite for wanting the same for others."

By marching and protesting in places like Ferguson and Baltimore, Black Lives Matter has put a spotlight on systemic injustices in the legal system and beyond that confront African Americans daily. For Christians, this presents a challenge: Is the church part of the movement, or is it complicit in moves to silence protesters?

One of the ways law enforcement authorities have attempted to diffuse protest is by asking pastors, especially black pastors, to step in and attempt to “calm” racially charged confrontations between protesters and police. Sometimes pastors are caught in the middle, even when they are supporting protesters. I cannot forget the case of pastor Renita Lamkin, who was shot with a rubber bullet in Ferguson as she prayed in the middle of the street, kneeling between the protesters and police.

While some religious leaders are critical of Black Lives Matter, the movement is confronting the reality that many churches in America have acknowledged: systemic racism. Back in the 1990s several denominations, including the Southern Baptist Convention and the Assemblies of God, held meetings on racial reconciliation and produced statements decrying their own history of racism and committing themselves to move beyond that past.

Yet it remains difficult to get both black and white churches invested in the fight for social justice and equality. Joining the cause still elicits repercussions. Recently, [Michelle Higgins’s speech at an InterVarsity Christian Fellowship’s mission conference](#) was called into question because she referred to Black Lives Matter as a “movement on mission in the truth of God.” She pushed the issue of social justice and at the same time pushed against some issues dear to evangelical Christians, such as the movement against abortion and Planned Parenthood. Some sponsors and donors questioned Higgins’s comments and IVCF’s embrace of Black Lives Matter. Later InterVarsity issued a statement clarifying its position on abortion but reasserting its support for Black Lives Matter.

Churches that hope to reach young people need to address the issue of race. Churches in Annapolis, Maryland, are modeling one way to do this by having discussions with other churches in the area. The effort arose after several Black Lives Matter signs were stolen from the grounds of local churches. Putting up signs is great. Talking about racism together is even better.

While it is tempting to ask if the Black Lives Matter movement is making real change, I challenge churches, pastors, and laypeople to ask another question: Does the Black Lives Matters movement make you uncomfortable? If so, why? If it is because you do not like marches or confrontations, then you are part of the problem. Jesus said, “I come not to bring peace, but a sword.” Racism and systemic injustice is the evil that the Black Lives Matter movement is fighting. If we believe that “all lives matter,” we first have to consider which lives are treated as if they do not matter.