

The church's respectability politics: Black Lives Matter symposium

The young people leading this movement have heard enough about Martin Luther King's dream. It is not enough for church leaders to reply that they don't know much history.

by [Gary Dorrien](#) in the [March 16, 2016](#) issue

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](#).)

Black Lives Matter was perfectly named by its founders, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, because it immediately conveys what must be said—that black lives have never mattered in much of white America. This organization is playing a valuable catalyzing role in a new black freedom movement that is much broader than Black Lives Matter.

In New York City, where I live, Black Lives Matter is one of many players, allying with organizations that have long histories in protest politics. In upward of 20 cities, Black Lives Matter has surged into a leading role. In both cases, Black Lives Matter has provided the rhetoric that most of the movement speaks.

The young people leading this movement are angry and have heard enough about Martin Luther King's dream. Many grew up in cities where black communities have endured hostile treatment from police for decades. Many have never experienced any other relationship with police, while living in communities wracked by rates of unemployment that are triple or quadruple the national average. We are now reaping what comes from severe economic inequality, bad schools, and vengeful three-strike laws that stuffed American prisons with people of color and ruined the lives of millions.

Black Lives Matter activists have heard throughout their lives that they have to become respectable to avert a bad future. Many believe that the church has discredited itself by preaching this message assiduously, which has put church leaders on the defensive. Black Lives Matter is harshly critical of everything smacking of respectability politics. It is not enough for church leaders to reply that their young accusers don't know much history.

The pertinent history is that this has happened before. Until lightning struck in Montgomery in December 1955, precious few people believed that churches were indispensable to the black freedom movement. The usual view among movement activists was that church communities were too conservative, insular, and respectable to challenge white racism.

In the early 20th century, every black social gospel leader had to overcome a conservative majority in their own churches as well as movement leaders who looked down on churchpeople. The same thing was true for every black social gospel leader of the second and third generations. The ministers and church-based activists who later became synonymous with the civil rights movement had to battle their way into it, proving their relevance. The generation that came of age during the Black Power movement had a similar challenge. Today it is happening again.

Meanwhile, all is not terrible and hopeless. The new black freedom movement has created a new generation of defiant activist leaders bent on breaking white supremacy. Church and seminary groups are playing supportive roles in protest events across the country. Protests are not merely recycling a core of activists; widely diverse crowds are showing up for demonstrations. And at the congregational and ecumenical levels, there is more interfaith community organizing occurring today than ever, with a stronger emphasis than ever on structural racism. PICO is surging. IAF remains the leading force in interfaith organizing. Gamaliel is strong here and there. DART is training community organizers. Interfaith Worker Justice has made the transition to its second generation.

Interfaith community organizing is inherently limited: it has trouble scaling up, and it burns people out. But it builds personal relationships across racial, ethnic, sexual, religious, and class lines. It empowers marginalized communities. It pulls middle-class church communities out of their comfort zones. It does these things better than any kind of social justice activism. And religious communities are distinctly suited for it.