

## Racial Justice: Being a Part of the Conversation

A few months ago, my (predominantly-white) church in Newtown, Connecticut started holding weekly vigils on our front lawn (our church sits on Main St. in our town) during which time we have been holding up signs that read, “Black Lives Matter,” “Injustice anywhere



Rick Chamiec-Case

is a threat to justice everywhere,” “Remembering Tamir Rice,” and so on. We call our vigils “Moral Monday Vigils” since we meet on Monday afternoons/evenings, and because of resonance this name has with the Moral Monday movement active in a number of major cities in the US. Our vigils are very simple (maybe 10-15 people, sometimes a few candles), and they are silent. They are mostly intended to create conversation within our town and to keep the topic of racial justice on our mostly-white community’s radar.

Many who drive by during our vigils give us friendly honks of support or a thumbs up – although some extend fingers other than their thumbs toward us (!), and a group of pick-up trucks often drive by and blow black exhaust smoke on our group (a practice I have since learned is called “rolling coal”). Probably the most common push-back we get, though, is people rolling down their windows and calling out angrily, “Don’t you know that all lives matter?” or “Police lives matter, too, you know!”

Several weeks after we started holding our vigils, we received our first written response from a community member, a doctor in our town. It was addressed to our pastor. Here is an excerpt from that email (note: it might be helpful to keep in mind that at the time the email was written, our town of Newtown was bracing for the 3<sup>rd</sup> anniversary of the tragic shooting of the 26 students and teachers in our Sandy Hook school back on 12/14/12) :

*Reverend:*

*Black lives matter. But: white lives don't matter. Asian lives don't matter. Syrian lives don't matter. Veteran lives don't matter. Animal lives don't matter. Because --black lives matter more than all these other lives, because this platform is a popular grandstand. But as a minister: you should be ashamed for jumping on a grandstand, while ignoring the rights of everyone else.*

*Why are you bringing a divisive message to our community by focusing on only one nationality/color/whatever you want to call it? Are you having fun? Haven't we had enough divisiveness in Newtown? Do you remember the color of the children, teachers and administrators who died in Newtown a few years ago? They were white. But please. Don't get excited about that. They weren't black, and black lives matter, so obviously, Reverend, white lives don't matter. And we all need to focus on black lives. Because that's your platform.*

*Your “demonstrations” in Newtown are unwarranted, divisive and truly painful for all of us in this community. Maybe you should find yourself some other place to demonstrate.*

Because our Moral Monday vigils have been a lay-led ministry in our church, my pastor (who, often joins us for our vigils, and, incidentally, has been an incredible support to the entire community as the town has grieved the loss of the children and teachers killed in the Sandy Hook tragedy three years ago) asked if I would respond to this community member’s email. Here is an excerpt from my email response (I have left the names out for confidentiality’s sake):

*My name is Rick Chamiec-Case. I am a parishioner at Trinity Episcopal Church in Newtown, one of the lay leaders of a group at Trinity which has been working to begin a conversation in our parish about the issue of racial justice and equality in our society. . .*

*Please know first of all that we greatly appreciate your taking the time to express your concerns about our weekly vigils. One of our group’s primary goals has been to generate conversation with the community about*

*issues of race and justice in our society. We hope that this email exchange will be the start of a conversation with you that will help our group learn how to interact more effectively with community members. We are very new to this (our group only formed this spring), and so we have lots to learn. Feedback like yours is especially helpful as we seek to find our way.*

*Please also know that we feel terribly that our vigils have felt divisive to you (especially during this extremely sensitive time in our community as we approach the 3<sup>rd</sup> anniversary of the tragic shooting at Sandy Hook School). Our goal in starting these vigils has been quite the opposite. Through these vigils we have been advocating for our community to unite in a shared commitment to fair and just and compassionate treatment for all people. Like you, folks in our group believe passionately that all lives matter - Asian lives, Syrian lives, the lives of officers, the lives of veterans - all lives with no exceptions. So when some of us have been holding up signs that read “Black Lives Matter,” we have not meant to suggest (by any stretch) that Black lives matter more than any others. Rather, we are trying to lift up people of color whom we believe are often treated by society as if their lives matter less than the lives of others in many insidious ways.*

*We believe that the inequities experienced by people who are Black in our society (whether in terms of income and wealth disparities, unequal access to health care, housing, and quality education, or comparative levels of incarceration – not to mention the fear of being targeted or harmed by some law enforcement officials based on the color of their skin) are staggering, and we feel that our faith calls us to stand in solidarity with those who are most vulnerable and are being treated the most unfairly in our society. An article that probes this tension between believing that all lives matter, while still trying to recognize and advocate for those who are being treated as if their lives matter less, can*

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be found at: <https://sojo.net/articles/blacklivesmatter-why-we-need-stop-replying-all-lives-matter>. This article has really resonated for me, although I realize we might not fully agree on some of the points in this article.

I hope you noticed that while a couple of the signs we hold up during our vigils read “Black Lives Matter,” many of the other signs speak about issues of social justice as they apply to persons of any and all races, ethnicities and backgrounds. For example, some of our other signs we have been holding up read:

- “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”
- “Never forget that justice is what love looks like in public.”
- “Good schools for everyone’s children.”
- “We stand for a just society for all.”
- “Fight institutional racism”

I would like to close this email by reiterating our appreciation for your having taken the time to provide us with your feedback, and by inviting you meet with some of our group’s leaders in person so that we can come to better understand your concerns, continue to learn from you, and share more of what we hope to accomplish through our vigils. We are quite open to suggestions from you and others in the community about how we can best meet our goal of advocating for a shared commitment to fair and just and compassionate treatment for all, especially those who are being treated unjustly. Would you be open to meeting with us at a time and location (perhaps at a local coffee shop?) that is convenient for you? Let us know what you think - thanks!

The group in our church met to discuss how we might make adjustments in our vigils to be responsive to this community member’s concern. We struggled a good deal with this. Here are a couple of the things we decided:

- There was agreement that the Moral Monday Vigils had been at least somewhat effective in “getting folks’ attention” and generating some conversation (some positive, some critical) about the topic of racial justice outside of just our group. We decided to use this “attention” to invite people from the wider Newtown community to

engage in more in-depth conversations with us – at meetings which would be held at a more “neutral” site within the community (perhaps the public library). We discussed submitting a public invitation to participate in these meetings/conversations via our local town newspaper.

- Our group decided that we should select one of the many issues associated with racial justice (for example, mass incarceration; inequity in access to education; issues related to unequal access to housing, etc.) and get behind some concrete, practical strategies to address racial justice in at least one targeted area.

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I share this personal experience about my church’s Moral Monday vigils not to suggest that NACSW specifically endorses (or should endorse) this or any particular strategy for addressing racial justice issues in our society. I am aware that there are members of NACSW who have different views about how to tackle racial justice in general, as well as the Black Lives Matter movement in particular; we are a diverse association in terms of the ways our members understand and live out our faith and our social work practice. Rather, I share this experience to raise an important question for NACSW: what role can and should NACSW be playing to support and inform these kinds of conversations - and actions - within congregations and faith groups in our communities? How could NACSW become a more vital resource for congregations like mine struggling to find our way on this critically important issue (and on other issues of similar importance)?

One such way for NACSW to be a vital resource for the Church is through the development of strong, vibrant NACSW member interest groups which focus on generating and sharing resources, ideas, and best practice examples related to issues and topics of interest to Christians in social work. Over the years, a number of member interest groups have evolved within NACSW which have enabled members to wrestle with how to best integrate faith and social work in specific areas in which those members are especially experienced and passionate.

Toward that end, a number of members of NACSW have banded together to form a new Racial Justice member interest group. One of the first things this

group did was to recruit about a dozen workshops on the topic of racial justice for our Fall, 2015 convention in Grand Rapids. Then at the convention, NACSW invited the presenters of these workshops, as well as Saturday evening keynote speaker Lisa Sharon Harper (a national leader on this topic from Sojourner’s), to brainstorm about possible ways this member interest group could both make a contribution to the professional literature on this topic (from a Christian and social work perspective), as well as become more active in racial justice issues.

Currently, NACSW’s racial justice member interest group is working on three projects:

1. Continuing to recruit workshops on racial justice for NACSW’s Convention 2016, and working toward a special issue of the journal on this topic within the next couple of years
2. Developing a full day preconvention institute for NACSW’s Convention 2016 that includes structured discussion on a range of racial justice topics, an experiential exercise designed to help participants become more self-aware of their perspectives on race and diversity, and possibly a site visit to Cincinnati’s Underground Railroad Museum ([www.freedomcenter.org](http://www.freedomcenter.org)) – or perhaps even holding the entire preconvention institute on-site at this museum.
3. Exploring ways to become more active in the area of racial justice by selecting one of the many issues associated with social justice (for example, mass incarceration, inequities in access to education, housing, or healthcare, voter rights, and so on) and get behind some concrete, practical strategies to address racial justice in at least one targeted area.

To keep the momentum of their initial work at the convention moving forward, this new member interest group has launched a listserv and started bi-monthly conference calls to continue their work on these three projects. Please don’t hesitate to contact the NACSW office ([info@nacs.org](mailto:info@nacs.org)) if you would like to subscribe to the racial justice listserv and/or become a part of this member interest group. We would welcome your ideas and energy in support of this new interest group’s commitment to better understanding, addressing, and supporting the efforts of churches and faith communities related to this crucial issue of racial justice in our communities!