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Five ways to support Black Lives Matter

Many Unitarian Universalists want to support the Black Lives Matter movement. Here are five ways to get started.

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A protester holds a #BlackLivesMatter bandana at a rally in Portland, Oregon, June 28, 2015. (© Christopher L. Walton)

Although the Black Lives Matter coalition itself was founded in 2013, the slogan stormed into the national consciousness late last year, as high-profile cases of police brutality were cleared by grand juries from Missouri to New York. As my own involvement in the movement has increased, I've talked with fellow Unitarian Universalists across the country who are looking for ways to engage. Many are asking what they can do individually and what Unitarian Universalists can do collectively.

Answers are emerging. This summer, the UUA General Assembly called on UUs to support the [Black Lives Matter movement](#) [2]. Over the past year, some congregations have started [displaying banners](#) [3] proclaiming “Black Lives Matter”—and then putting them back up after vandals and thieves have defaced or stolen them. And individual UUs are joining the burgeoning movement, with some of us leading [protests](#) [4], [vigils](#) [5], and [community forums](#) [6] challenging racial injustice and systemic inequalities.

In this time of renewed attention and energy toward racial justice work, there exists in UU spaces tremendous excitement—but also caution and fear. Here are five ways UUs can engage with Black Lives Matter:

1. Learn

Many UUs come to racial justice conversations with good intentions but a lack of information about the realities of racial inequality and injustice as it exists today in their own communities. Get up to speed by following publications that cover Black Lives Matter and other racial justice movements, such as [Colorlines](#) [7], [The Root](#) [8], and [Black Voices](#) [9] from the *Huffington Post*.

Start a discussion group about Michelle Alexander's book [The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness](#) [10] or Bryan Stevenson's [Just Mercy](#) [11], the UUA's new “Common Read.” The UUA has prepared study guides for both books.

And, as you follow the news and dig deeper, resist the allure of “respectability politics [12]” (listening only to voices if they have traditional markers of formal education and influence). White UUs need to talk with each other about whiteness [13], white supremacy, and “white fragility [14].” Not all UUs are white, of course, but I am often asked whether mostly white congregations can do racial justice work. Yes, they can!

2. Connect

UUs need to connect to and embrace the BLM movement as it exists today. The Rev. Osagyefo Sekou, a middle-aged black man and renowned activist who spoke at the 2015 UUA General Assembly, told *Yes! Magazine*, “The leadership is black, poor, queer, women. . . . I am not a leader in this movement; I am a follower. I take my orders from 23-year-old queer women [15].” Listening to young, black leaders, locally and nationally, can be challenging—but it is a vital step.

Find the movement near you. The National Ferguson Response Network [16] promotes local events tagged by city and state.

Today’s movement does not look like the civil rights struggle of the 1950s and 1960s, during which older black men (many of whom were clergy) got most of the credit and controlled the messaging and strategy.

So much of the conversation—and organizing—happens online, especially on Twitter. My good friend Brian Hubbard, when asked how people could connect with Black Lives Matter if they weren’t on Twitter, responded, “By getting on Twitter.”

To get plugged into the conversation whenever a big event happens, follow activists like Netta Elzie (@Nettaaaaaaaa [17]), “Ida’s Disciple” (@prisonculture [18]), and Deray Mckesson (@deray [19]) and journalists and media analysts like Wesley Lowery (@WesleyLowery [20]), Jenée Desmond-Harris (@jdesmondharris [21]), Lisa Bloom (@LisaBloom [22]), Elon James White (@elonjames [23]), and Ta-Nehisi Coates (@tanehisicoates [24]).

3. Support

Protests need food and water. Movements cost money. Events need setup and takedown help, and meetings need physical spaces. After connecting with local leaders, offering assistance can be a great way to show solidarity.

On short notice in late July, the Rev. Mike Morran and John Vivian of First Unitarian Society of Denver helped the local BLM chapter host more than fifty travelers on their

way from southern California to the Movement for Black Lives national convention in Cleveland.

For UUs of color, support can also mean supporting one another. Connecting with other UUs of color on a human level—whether it’s with prolific social media users like black UU Leslie Butler MacFadyen ([@LeslieMac](#) [25]) or with people in your area—can help reduce feelings of isolation. For me, checking in with other UUs of color has helped me feel spiritually and socially connected.

4. Engage

Make it known you are a part of this movement. Post about it on Facebook. Buy a yard sign or bumper sticker, even though it might get stolen. Go to protests or community meetings—they’re usually just a Twitter or Facebook search away. Sacrifice part of your week to let your commitment to this work be visible.

Leslie Butler MacFadyen issued a series of challenges to white allies concerning engagement. [Read her series of tweets](#) [26]; does one of her challenges call you to act?

Part of engaging this work is reframing our view of what is truly at stake. White antiracism activist Chris Crass electrified a General Assembly workshop in June when he told the room of hundreds, “The question for us as Unitarian Universalists is not how many people of color we can get in our pews; it’s how much damage can we do to white supremacy.”

5. Stay Woke

The term “stay woke” is used on social media by people who continue pointing to the ever-growing list of victims of state violence, racial profiling, or other racial injustices. Unitarian Universalists, too, can “stay woke” by continuing to grapple with the magnitude of the work ahead, and by refusing to succumb to the temptation to ignore the racial realities of our country.

It is imperative, whatever our level of education or our privileges, that none of us looks away. If we are to live up to our [First Principle](#) [27], and truly honor the inherent worth and dignity of every person, then we must proclaim, with words and deeds, that black lives matter.

DEPARTMENT: LIFE

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- [13] http://www.huffingtonpost.com/john-metta/i-racist_b_7770652.html
- [14] <http://www.alternet.org/culture/why-white-people-freak-out-when-theyre-called-out-about-race>
- [15] <http://www.yesmagazine.org/peace-justice/black-lives-matter-s-favorite-minister-reverend-sekou-young-queer>
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