

**A Sign of Solidarity and Support:
A Word from St Paul's Free Methodist Church**

Dear Editor:

After a recent conversation with Police Chief Lou Lorton and Sergeant Deb Keserauskis, one of our pastors was encouraged to share with the larger Greenville community why we have decided to place a Black Lives Matter sign on our lawn. The following is our latest thinking about why we continue to replace our sign every time it is taken.

We understand that there are many differing viewpoints regarding the Black Lives Matter movement, and we want to be sure to state that we do not support or condone violence in any form, especially toward police. We believe such violence is profoundly unChristian.

Our decision to display a Black Lives Matter sign on our church lawn is simple: we want to say "black lives matter." Since its beginning in 1860, the Free Methodist Church has been committed to racial justice and equality. Our denomination's founders were abolitionists. The BLM movement is a current-day expression of this commitment to racial justice and equality, and we believe this commitment is at the heart of the gospel.

We share the goals of the Black Lives Matter Yard Sign Project (founded in St. Louis, <https://blacklivesmatteryardsignproject.wordpress.com>), on the one hand to create conversation but also to show the solidarity and support that this movement intended (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/01/black-lives-matter-signs-national-movement-st-louis>).

At St Paul's we are committed to giving witness to the good news that God was in Christ reconciling the whole world to himself. Reconciliation requires justice and truthfulness, both of which we understand to be the rallying cry of the Black Lives Matters movement. The leading voices of the movement are most concerned to speak out against a world where "Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise. It is an affirmation of Black folks' contributions to this society, our humanity, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression" (taken from <http://blacklivesmatter.com/guiding-principles/>).

We believe Christians must stand against racism. If it is true that Christ has changed everything, that there is "neither Jew nor Gentile," we must give witness to the fact that racism is an injustice that makes reconciliation impossible. Although we understand the sentiment, we think the "All Lives Matter" counter misses the point. Of course all lives matter, but this response to Black Lives Matter fails to recognize that Black people in this country have historically and systematically been excluded

from that "All." Our Black brothers and sisters are telling us that they are being treated as though their lives do not matter. And we are listening. We are learning that it is important to emphasize precisely that Black lives matter.

Despite the BLM movement repeatedly announcing that it is non-violent, violent acts have been committed and attached to the movement. This is against one of the movement's key principles: "Loving Engagement." The movement states, "We are committed to embodying and practicing justice, liberation, and peace in our engagements with one another" (taken from <http://blacklivesmatter.com/guiding-principles/>). As Christians, we mourn violent acts and pray for the families and lives that have been affected. But when a rogue individual commits a violent act and attaches it to a movement, that person does not invalidate the movement. Many individuals did violence in the name of the Civil Rights Movement, yet we rightly honor that movement and remember it as a peaceful one.

We recognize our interpretation of BLM will be contested by other Christians, and so we do not claim to speak for all Christians, all Free Methodists, or even all those who attend St Paul's. We are trying our best to understand our place and time in light of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Even though Christians disagree about the witness of the Black Lives Matter movement, we believe that our differences do not overwhelm the unity we have in Christ. Uniformity is not required for unity.

We confess that we don't know how to best give witness to the truth that Black lives matter, and so we are interested in participating in a community conversation about our support of Black lives. We have hosted and participated in a number of discussions within our local church community, but we would welcome a larger conversation for any interested. If you are interested in such a conversation, we would love to hear from you and look forward to planning an event together for the Greenville community.

In Christ's peace,

The Board of Administration and Pastoral Staff of St Paul's Free Methodist Church

