

## **Summary of May 4, 2017, Congregational Meeting**

### **“A Banner and Beyond: Follen Responds to Racism”**

On May 4, 2017, a group of about 50 Follenites gathered to learn about and discuss a resolution calling for Follen to become an intentionally antiracist congregation and the hanging of a Black Lives Matter banner as a public witness of that commitment. Opening remarks by the moderator, Maggie Herzig, put the meeting in the context of what preceded it: a meeting in December with Program Council President Alex Bromley, Parish Board Chair Ann Engelhart, and others to discuss proper procedures for initiating congregational conversations; a congregational meeting on January 11; meetings with most action teams; and a meeting with Program Council at which they unanimously approved the resolution. (A meeting with Parish Board was planned for the following week. See update, below.)

The group presenting the resolution, the Follen Responds to Racism (FRR) team was introduced: Tempe Goodhue, chair, Nancy Alloway, Marcia Butman, Maggie Herzig, Kathy Hoben, Susanne Intriligator, Nancy McCarthy, Harriet Peterson, Catherine Rielly, Wilma Ronco, and Robin Tartaglia.

Harriet Peterson then gave an overview of the history of the formation of Follen Responds to Racism. She reviewed the main points of the resolution, starting with the “Whereas” statements, which include the historical roots which laid the foundation for today’s inequities and the continuing disempowerment of Black people by White people. The “we resolve” section calls for Follen to use its resources to educate people about the inequities and injustices Black people have and still do endure. It also calls for us to use our resources to work with outside groups, particularly those that are led by Black people. One of the most important commitments is to raise children to question and change racist ideology and practices.

Tempe Goodhue referenced the Chronology handout summarizing antiracist work done by FRR and other groups this church year, noting that passing the resolution is a call to intensify and expand such efforts. She noted that the resolution was revised to support the racial justice goals of the “broadly based Black Lives Matter movement” as it became clear that this was more appropriate than calling for support of any one organization. She noted that in response to input from the Follen community, the resolution now makes clear statements acknowledging the importance of intersectionality and that the expectation was that passing the resolution would not distract Follenites from devoting energy to other social justice issues. She also reported on a meeting with the Lexington Police, including their concluding sentiment that they would not view the banner as an anti-police message and would support Follen. Finally, she reported that someone’s impression that the UU Urban Ministry did not support the BLM movement was a misperception. They don’t have a banner (Tempe noted that their work in Roxbury is a statement that Black lives matter) but the staff all support the movement.

Then a panel of three speakers was introduced: two Follen members, Lex Johnson and Bernie Harleston, and a lay leader at First Parish Arlington, Lori Kenschaft, who has been deeply involved with social justice work there and serves as the primary point person for matters related to their Black Lives Matter banner.

Lex Johnson eloquently described her journey of discovery and her feelings about hanging a Black Lives Matter banner. She started by saying she has gone through three stages, starting with a straightforward “yes,” that then shifted for her and become more complex as she considered questions related to tactics and violence; she felt very conflicted. In the third stage, she moved to a “qualified yes.”

She spoke of her awareness of the hideous abuses of power, exacerbated by the election of a racist. The recent hate crime in Lexington also had a profound impact on her and heightened her anxieties for her family. But then, as she dug deeper, she found she had serious concerns about the decentralized BLM movement and potential use of violent tactics, despite her admiration for much of the work it is doing. She spoke of teachers like the Dalai Lama and a wish for more safeguards against violence. She felt reassured, however, after looking at BLM’s track record over the past three years and, considering their “righteous struggle,” she changed her mind and offered a “qualified yes.” Her conclusion, barring things spiraling out of control, was that she is ready for Follen to raise the banner and proclaim to the world that Black lives matter. *See a video of Lex’s remarks on [follen.org](https://follen.org).*

Bernie Harleston spoke next, commenting on how he understood the BLM movement and his thinking about a banner at Follen. He said he sees the BLM movement as a political agenda aimed at making real the profoundly simple expectation that white America view black American with respect and equality. He stated that the evidence of injustice against Blacks is incontrovertible, reminding listeners of the long history of struggle against oppression going back to the time of slavery, and highlighting current problems related to law enforcement. In response to the criticisms of BLM for its failure to renounce violence unequivocally, he reminded Follenites that Dr. King’s work was *not* always nonviolent.

Regarding a banner, Bernie felt it would be a symbol of the concerns of the movement, and that identifying with it says that Follen agrees with and supports the commitment to eradicate the inequalities and areas of disrespect. He noted that the real importance was the efforts beyond the banner made in support of racial justice, such as the Antiracist Book Group. He was in favor of the resolution, in which he saw reflected both the goals of the Black Lives Matter movement and UU principles, and the banner, which he saw as a public symbol of our commitment to those goals. *See a video of Bernie’s remarks on [follen.org](https://follen.org).*

Finally, Lori Kenschaft gave a moving account of her congregation’s history with its banner. It began with a vigil sparked by outrage over the non-indictment in the police shooting of Michael Brown. Five hundred people gathered outside the church, and Lori and other lay leaders felt it was

appropriate to make a permanent public statement. The Parish Board voted to put up a “public witness banner” with “Black Lives Matter” and accompanying text.

There have been six acts of vandalism. The Arlington police are very supportive. In one case, the vandal was identified and the church leaders invited them to participate in a restorative justice process, which they did. Lori commented that she participated in the process, and felt that the vandal—and she herself—was changed as a result.

There were also many positive reactions, including someone who left a red rose on the banner’s frame with a note saying, “In honor of my first lover, a black man who was killed 30 years ago today.” Several new people visited the church after the banner went up, and a few of them joined the church afterwards. One man who is Black actually moved to Arlington because while house-hunting he saw the banner and thought, “That is the kind of community in which I want to raise my children.”



First Parish Arlington’s first BLM banner.

The message on First Church Arlington’s banner has changed over time to include in smaller font welcoming and supportive messages for other marginalized groups, including immigrants, refugees, and members of the LGBTQ communities. The church has also put up messages about other issues, such as climate change. In all, Lori says the experience has been positive and has moved the congregation to act on their values.

*See a video of Lori’s remarks on [follen.org](http://follen.org).*

The meeting up to this point was videotaped. The final portion, moderated by Maggie Herzig, was an opportunity for attendees to express their concerns and ask questions; this was not taped. At the very end, people could pass in comments or questions on index cards; 15 people did that with remarks ranging in length from several paragraphs to five words: “Put up the damn banner.” Overall, 11 people basically supported the resolution, 1 supported the resolution with the banner removed and more specifics added, and 3 only made banner wording suggestions.

During the Q&A segment, the thoughts and questions offered included the following:

- Referencing the work of George Lakoff, an objection to the use of the phrase “Black Lives Matter” as bad messaging that strengthens the hand of racists.
- A desire to see the experience of other groups facing discrimination reflected in the banner.

- A wish for greater specificity in the resolution; it should have more teeth. What specifically will we address?
- Concern that with the banner we will become a sloganeering church, that we haven't done anything of substance that makes a difference.
- A comparison to our being a Welcoming Congregation, so why is it difficult to also be antiracist and say, "Black lives matter"?
- Information that the May 21 Share the Plate will benefit Black Lives Matter Cambridge, to help with their initiatives, especially a symposium planned for this summer.
- The comment that this is about working together across differences, which their life experience has proved is possible, and urging a focus on raising antiracist children.
- An observation that in the Concord and Arlington churches, their banners have provided incentive to do more.
- Information about how Anne Grady has compared signers of abolitionist petitions in Lexington in the 1840s and 50s with Follen's membership rolls from that period. About 20% of the members signed. This may seem low, but given the widespread opposition to outspoken abolitionists at the time, perhaps it constitutes a "hotbed."
- A question as to could the resolution say more about the banner, e.g., will there be rotating messages.
- An expression of thanks, plus a concern about the relatively small number of people in attendance and a wish for a larger discussion, and postponing the vote.
- A concern that a banner would be a trigger for a young person of color, a "reverse hurt."
- A comment that it's a privilege for us *not* to feel fear on a regular basis, while fearfulness is a common experience for people of color.
- A comment that a youngster could see our sign and think, "That church is paying attention."
- A reflection asking why it is so hard to say the words "Black lives matter" and a commentary that it's the overall resolution [commitment to becoming an intentionally and proactively antiracist congregation] that's important.

**Update:** Four days after this meeting, the Parish Board unanimously approved the resolution with an edit to item #3, about public witness, that removed specific possibilities for a banner (but keeping that it will include the words "Black lives matter") and indicated that the Board will take responsibility for overseeing the process that leads to installation of a banner.