

Natick Interfaith Clergy

Statement on the Need to Address Racism in Natick

June 19<sup>th</sup>, 2020

On May 25<sup>th</sup>, 2020, George Floyd, an unarmed black man, was killed by a Minneapolis police officer who pressed his knee on Floyd's neck for eight minutes and forty-six seconds. The nation and the world watched this cruel and dehumanizing killing unfold via a cellphone video taken by a bystander, one of many who demanded to no avail that the officer take his knee off of Floyd's neck. In this disturbing video, we also saw George Floyd plead for his life, saying "I can't breathe" and "you're going to kill me." Watching George Floyd die in this terrifying way has convinced us that the problem of racism in our nation must be addressed. As righteous protests have swept the nation for weeks now, we have all had a chance to reflect more deeply on the profound injustice and suffering that racism causes.

As a matter of faith, we believe that racism is wrong. Racism contradicts the biblical affirmation that all human beings are made in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:27). God's essence is love, whereas the essence of racism is hate. Racism stands in opposition to the will of God, and therefore we believe that liberation from racism is a possibility that God calls us to affirm in action. We believe that it is our responsibility as local clergy to speak to this problem of racism as we see it in our own town.

From the beginning of the colonization of this country, white supremacy was used by colonists to justify racist policies of unjust war, land theft, and genocide against indigenous peoples; white supremacy was also used to justify the trans-Atlantic human-trafficking of Africans and their enslavement in this country. Despite the fact that our nation had a robust Abolitionist movement and fought a Civil War to end slavery—and despite the progress of the Civil Rights movement, which formally ended the policy of Segregation and won Americans of African descent the right to vote—white supremacy remains an institutionalized reality in American life that pervades the way we think and act on a daily basis. White supremacy, which expresses itself in racist policies and practices, is the reason that people in this country with black skin are more likely to die in childbirth, more likely to be pulled over by the police and also to go to prison, less likely to be hired or promoted, more likely to live in poverty, and more likely to die of COVID 19.

The population of Natick, as of the 2010 US census, was 85.4% white, 7.2% Asian, 3% Hispanic, 2% black, .1% Native American, .5% of other races, and 2% of two or more races. That same year, the US Census found that Massachusetts as a whole was 80.4% white, 5.3% Asian, 9.6% Hispanic, 6.6% black, 4.6% of other races and 2.6% of two or more races. Therefore, Natick has a higher than average white and Asian population, and a lower than average population of Hispanics, blacks, and people of other races. Why is this? Are there policies, practices, and attitudes that exclude Hispanics and blacks from the Town of Natick? We suspect that up until at least the 1970's, de-facto segregation through real estate practices like red-lining prevented black and brown people from living in the Town of Natick. Still today, though people of color are not systematically excluded, a culture of white privilege permeates the Town of Natick, making it more difficult for people of color to thrive here.

Most residents of Natick do not realize that our town was originally established by John Eliot as a "Praying Town" for indigenous peoples called Praying Indians who adopted Christian faith while retaining their cultural identity. During King Philip's War, however, the Praying Indians were systematically decimated by white colonists, in spite of their declared neutrality: they were imprisoned on Deer Island where the vast majority starved to death because of harsh conditions; others were conscripted into forced military service; many others fled. Those who survived and returned to Natick were soon dispossessed of their lands by white settlers. What a shame that a town originally established as a refuge for Praying Indians now only has a Native American population of .1%.

Natick needs to do its part to honor the truths embodied by the Black Lives Matter movement. White racism degrades the lives of black and brown people in America on a daily basis. The same is true in Natick; to deny this is to be part of the problem rather than part of the solution. All across America, black people are pulled over by the police more frequently, and they more frequently have the police called on them by white people who are implicitly biased against them. Throughout the nation, black people have a harder time finding jobs than white people, even when their qualifications and skills are virtually the same. We need to take a hard look at how such realities play out in our own Natick community.

We need to honestly examine the extent to which racism is present in Natick in areas such as policing, education, housing, town hiring practices, business ownership and employment, and town leadership representation. Because of our understanding of the experience of people of color in our Town, and because of our knowledge of the history and culture of Natick, we assert that Natick is no exception to this nation's ongoing history of white supremacy and racism. Therefore, we believe that our Town needs to form an

official Committee for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, empowered by the Select Board (aka Board of Selectmen). We also believe that we need to hire a qualified professional in the field to work full time with this Committee to understand and correct the problems of racism in our Town.

The Natick clergy are not of one mind as to whether we should be gathering in person to protest. Many of us had strict social distancing practices in place before our nation's recent awakening to the problem of racism. Some are now willing to gather in person to protest, while others prefer virtual methods. Nevertheless, we stand united in our call for substantial action for racial justice and greater equality in our town.

We also want to celebrate Natick's accomplishments in terms of promoting diversity. We applaud the fact that so many people come out for our yearly interfaith service celebrating Martin Luther King Day. We celebrate that we have a yearly Multicultural Day on the Town Common organized by the Natick Cultural District. We applaud the work of Natick Families of Color Unite, Natick Is United, SPARK Kindness, the Rainbow Peace Flag Project, the Racial Justice Dialogues, and other local groups committed to diversity and inclusion. We are glad our town changed our High School sports logo from the Natick Redmen to the Natick Redhawks in 2012. We are grateful that our Community Senior Center hired Lauri Ryding as a staff person for LGBTQ inclusion and that a local film-maker, Zadi Zokou, made a documentary called "Praying Town" to share the story of the Praying Indians. We are grateful for all those who are working to make our town more welcoming and more inclusive. We applaud the many people of conscience in town government attempting to hire people of color and encouraging people of color to run for office, join committees, and participate in town

government. There are many people in Natick who are committed to anti-racist lifestyles. We recognize and celebrate all this.

Now is the time to take it to the next level. Racism is perhaps the single biggest flaw in our national life. Racism is ungodly, cruel, and delusional—but it cannot survive in the light of truth and the warmth of compassion. Therefore, the Natick Interfaith Clergy pledge that we will preach about racism, we will call out racism when we see it, we will organize our own efforts to address racism, and we will stand in solidarity with all those groups and individuals in our town who are working for racial justice. In all this, we believe, God will help us.

The Rev. Rebecca Bourret, Pastor, Christ Lutheran Church

Rev. Becky Gettel, St. Paul's Episcopal Church

Rev. John Hudson, Senior Pastor, Pilgrim UCC, Sherborn

Rabbi Daniel Liben, Temple Israel of Natick

Rev. Eric Markman, Hartford Street Presbyterian Church

Rev. Dr. Ian Mevorach, Minister, Common Street Spiritual Center

Rev. Dr. Jonathan New, Interim Pastor, First Congregational Church of Natick, UCC

Cantor Ken Richmond, Temple Israel of Natick

Rabbi Robin S. Sparr, HaMakom is The Place

Rev. Dr. Adam Tierney-Eliot, Pastor, The Eliot Church of Natick

Evangelist Deborah L. Younger-Mitchell, Refuge Deliverance Outreach Church, Randolph