

Small Group Ministry Focus: Black Lives Matter

Background

This session guides responses to video clips from two different sources: Opal Tometi's keynote presentation at the Marching in the Arc of Justice Living Legacy Project (LLP) Conference and the Standing on the Side of Love webinar on Black Lives Matter featuring Jova Lynne Vargas and Kenny Wiley. Both events happened in March 2015.

Opal Tometi is the Executive Director of the Black Alliance for Just Immigration (BAJI), a national organization that educates and advocates for immigrant rights and racial justice with African American, Afro-Latino, African, and Caribbean communities in the U.S. Opal is the daughter of Nigerian immigrants and in November 2014 was named an *Essence* magazine New Civil Rights Leader for her cutting edge, movement building work. Opal is a co-founder of Black Lives Matter and is a racial justice communications consultant.

Jova Lynne Vargas is a multimedia artist, activist, and educator whose artistic practice is centered in capturing/exploring survival genealogies within Black identity. Jova is a lifelong UU and a former Young Religious Unitarian Universalist (YRUU) leader who grew up in the Community Church of New York where she is a member. Jova worked as the Youth Arts Programs Manager at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. Jova is a founding member of the collective known as Black Brunch which has led several direct actions in the #blacklivesmatters movement.

Kenny Wiley is a third generation UU with roots in the Southwestern UU Conference and the Mountain Desert District. Kenny is the General Assembly Talks Coordinator for Young Adults at the 2015 General Assembly. He is an active member of the Denver Freedom Riders, which has taken the lead in Black Lives Matter organizing in the Denver area. Kenny is passionate about Unitarian Universalism and communities committed to justice and transformation. Kenny is a *UU World* senior editor and serves as Director of Faith Formation at Prairie UU Church in Parker, Colorado.

How to Use This Material

This guide and the related video clips posted online provide the focus of a small group ministry session. Add any traditional opening, chalice lighting, check-in, check-out, and closing to complete the sessions.

The video clips in this session total 23 minutes and 2 seconds. There are two options for discussion in small group ministry:

- Option 1: Watch the Opal Tometi video clip in its entirety, then consider any or all of the first three reflection questions. Next, watch the Standing on the Side of Love Black Lives Matter webinar and discuss any or all of the additional questions.
- Option 2: Watch only the video clip associated with a question before stopping the video and reflecting on the question. After discussing the question, show the next clip.

I. Opal Tometi Addresses the 2015 Selma LLP Conference (10:13)

<http://smallscreen.uua.org/videos/opal-tometti-addresses-the-2105-selma-llp-conference>

0:00 – 0:50 Why Black Lives Matter was Started

Tometi talks about “decades of racial injustice and assault that have weighed heavily on the black community.” Some people have been surprised to hear the statistics on state violence against black people and the results of studies on implicit biases, such as those Tometi reports from the Salon article. Some people still refuse to believe that the statistics and study results indicate systematic racial prejudice.

What is the first experience you can remember of encountering or witnessing institutional racism against black people? What was that like for you?

Why do you think it is hard for some people to attribute these opinions and actions to racial bias and racism?

3:50 – 8:17 Respectability Politics

Tometi talks about respectability politics which can be used to dehumanize marginalized people, assigning worth only to people who look and behave in a particular way. Have you heard people argue that the recent killings of several young black men by police should not prompt protests because the young men were involved in “disrespectable” behavior (such as selling loose cigarettes)? Many black people wonder if the same argument would be used if the victims had been white.

When have you felt that your inherent worth and dignity have been dismissed or that you have been held to a different standard of behavior because of an identity that you hold?

II. Excerpt of SSL-BLM Webinar (11:49)

<http://smallscreen.uua.org/videos/excerpt-of-ssl-blm-webinar>

0:00 – 5:27 What Black Lives Matter Means to Me

Wiley and Vargas answer why it is important to talk about why “Black Lives Matter.” Vargas lifts up the historical context that positions black people as uniquely subject to racism, while Wiley talks about the same respectability politics that Tometi mentioned. He posits that black people, in particular, are often judged to be worthy by society only if they look and behave in ways the dominant culture dictates are acceptable. Black Lives Matter does not mean that other lives do not matter, but that black people in America are asking the country to affirm their inherent worth and dignity.

How does turning the conversation to “All Lives Matter” (as some people do) keep us from truly confronting racism that targets black people?

5:50 – 11:49 Fed by Faith

Tometi says communities of faith have texts, teachers, and prophets to highlight our duty to love one another and commit to one another for the sake of our collective liberation.

What UU text, teachers and prophets can you call on to feed you spiritually in your justice work?

Vargas and Wiley discuss ways their UU faith calls them to rally behind Black Lives Matter in order to be true to their values and Principles.

How does your commitment to live your Unitarian Universalist faith, values, and Principles call you to respond to what you have heard today in the videos?

Who nurtured a sense of justice in you when you were young? How can we nurture UU youth and young adults involved in the Black Lives Matter or other black empowerment movements?