

STANDING UP TO HATE

The Charlottesville Clergy Collective
and the Lessons from August 12, 2017

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Editor's Notes

Time Line of Four White Supremacist Incursions on Charlottesville in 2017

May 13, 2017, Saturday, 9 PM: Several dozen people bearing flaming tiki torches gathered at the Lee Statue on Market Street chanting, "You will not replace us."

July 8, 2017: Fifty Ku Klux Klan members confronted a thousand counter-protestors at the Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson statue near the courthouse. Police escorted the KKK out of the city when the gathering was declared an unlawful assembly.

August 11, 2017, 9 PM: A crowd bearing lighted tiki torches marched to the UVA Rotunda, where they were met by students, faculty, and townspeople. University and Charlottesville Police broke up numerous fights.

August 12, 2017: That morning, hundreds attended the "Unite the Right" rally at the Lee Statue, where they confronted counter-protestors and were dispersed by police calling the gathering "an unlawful assembly." In early afternoon, a car rammed into counter-protestors, killing Heather Heyer. Later a state police helicopter monitoring the crowd crashed, killing the two officers aboard.

Names of Downtown Parks in Charlottesville

There are two parks in downtown Charlottesville where the events described in these essays took place. Their current names are Market Street Park and Court Square Park. The city of Charlottesville changed the names of these parks *three times* since 2017.

Market Street Park was originally named Lee Park, and the statue of Robert E. Lee was in the center of that park. In February 2017, the city council voted to remove the Robert E. Lee statue from the park. However, a lawsuit opposing the removal was filed in March 2017 and the statue remained, pending the outcome of the lawsuit. On June 5, 2017, the city council, led by Mayor Michael Signer, voted unanimously to change the park's name to Emancipation Park. In July 2018, the park was renamed Market Street Park.

Court Square Park was originally named Jackson Park, and it was in this park that the statue of Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson was located. In June 2017, the city

council voted to change the name to Justice Park, and in July 2018, the name was changed again to Court Square Park.

To avoid confusion, these parks will be identified by their *current* names in these essays, even though they had other names during the time period described.

Capitalization Decisions

Throughout this book, we will use the Associated Press style guide that capitalizes “Black” but not “white” or “brown.” (See John Daniszewski, “Why we will lowercase white,” *AP*, July 20, 2020, <https://blog.ap.org/announcements/why-we-will-lowercase-white>.)

Introduction: We Were There on August 12, 2017

You can imagine the tension that we experienced over the next few hours as a steady stream of unknown groups of heavily armed men and women walked up and down the streets in front of and adjacent to the synagogue, carrying Swastika flags and chanting “Heil Hitler,” accompanied by Nazi salutes. I watched them as a child in school—and later as an adult—knowing that my own immediate family had been murdered by that violent anti-Semitism.

—Rabbi Tom Gutherz, Congregation Beth Israel

Throughout this entire affront, nothing made me more angry and frustrated than hearing from stunned, ignorant, possibly well-meaning whites that “this is not who we are!”

—Reverend Brenda Brown-Grooms, New Beginnings Christian Community

Many white residents believed that this didn’t reflect who we were. Yet on a deeper level, the truth is that this weekend revealed uncomfortable realities that many of us, particularly white Christians, had avoided facing for too long. It was humbling and necessary to hear the voices of Black colleagues and friends responding, “Yes, this is who we are.” Now we all knew.

—Reverend Will Brown, University Baptist Church

I believe we are doing a better job at learning to not just give back the hate that we receive. Also, I believe I can say we understand better that other folks’ hate may come from a deep fear and loss of their way of life. We don’t agree with it because we don’t agree with white supremacists’ assumptions.

—Reverend Dr. Alvin Edwards, Mt. Zion First African Baptist Church

The Charlottesville Clergy Collective is a group of interfaith clergy and interested laypeople who gather regularly to discuss and address the challenge of racial and social injustice in the Charlottesville and Albemarle region of Virginia. We were initially called together by Rev. Dr. Alvin Edwards, pastor of Mt. Zion First African Baptist Church, after the 2015 massacre at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina.¹ Since our founding, we had been meeting monthly for conversation over breakfast with around twenty-five

in attendance. However, participation in our meetings increased when the Ku Klux Klan and neo-Nazis announced rallies for the summer of 2017 in Charlottesville.

In February 2017, the Charlottesville City Council voted 3–2 to remove a statue of Robert E. Lee from Market Street Park.² That decision led to protests by white supremacists as well as a court battle funded by those who loved these symbols of the pro-slavery movement. The Charlottesville Clergy Collective felt called to support the local Black community who had felt intimidated for years by these memorials to the Confederate “Lost Cause.” August 12, 2017, became the focal point for a reckoning with Charlottesville’s racial past and an opportunity for us all to rethink our history.

Early on Saturday morning, August 12, 2017, after a rousing prayer meeting at First Baptist, West Main Street, Clergy Collective attendees dispersed into two groups walking toward downtown along Main Street in Charlottesville, Virginia. The first group, dressed mostly in clergy garb headed for Market Street Park, (formerly named “Lee Park” and “Emancipation Park”), to peaceably confront white supremacists and others who had gathered for the “Unite the Right” rally. The second group included a Virginia state senator, several Episcopal bishops, and other faith leaders. They marched by the Jefferson School City Center,³ to McGuffey Park, singing and praying, peacefully showing support for their colleagues who put their lives at risk by witnessing to their faith and commitment to racial justice.

Still others gathered at First United Methodist Church, located across the street from Market Street Park. On that day, the church opened its doors as a sanctuary for rest, first aid, and counseling for those who came to the park to stand up for their Black and Jewish brothers and sisters against the Unite the Right agitators. From the front church steps, one could see the statue of Confederate general Robert E. Lee on top of his horse in the middle of the park. Erected in 1924 to affirm white supremacy, that statue became the rallying cry and totemic symbol for those who came ninety-three years later to oppose its removal. As the crowds gathered and clashed that day, nothing had prepared the city and its religious institutions for the devastation that would be wrought and the resulting death of counter protester Heather Heyer.

The Charlottesville Clergy Collective (CCC) owed much to Congregate Charlottesville (Congregate Cville) for their organizing work on August 11 and 12. Under the leadership of Brittany Caine-Conley and Rev. Seth Wispelwey, Congregate Cville issued a nationwide call for faith leaders to join them on August 12 at Market Street Park to bodily rebuke hate and violence and to proclaim God’s love for all. They brought in Rev. Osagyefo Sekou to help train participants

in “militant, nonviolent direct action.” Congregate Cville organized the Friday evening worship service at St. Paul Memorial Episcopal Church, the Saturday morning worship service at First Baptist West Main Street, the on-the-ground direct action at Market Street Park, and the support infrastructure for August 11 and 12. Many CCC members attended and participated in these offerings by Congregate Cville, and their recollections and reflections of their experiences are included in this book.

In anticipation of the August rally, the CCC leveraged the strengths and resources at our disposal to mobilize our members. Through our connections to community organizations and agencies, the CCC became a clearinghouse of information, resources, and educational and activism opportunities to counter the Unite the Right rally. We organized morning and noon prayer vigils at Market Street Park during the week prior to August 12. We also encouraged leaders of various faith traditions to organize worship services to provide hope and strength to the community and encourage resistance against white supremacy. Congregations across religious and theological divides worked together, and their members participated in each other’s offerings. As such, we represented and facilitated the most inclusive and diverse religious assemblies in the city, united by a desire for justice and healing for everyone in our community.

The “summer of hate” of 2017 revealed to many of us the remnants of slavery in our community and highlighted the necessity for repairing the toxic results of what many see as America’s original sin: the enslavement of millions of people of African descent. Racism is a systemic problem that has poisoned the structures, institutions, and foundational assumptions of the United States. Therefore, no one institution or segment of society can singlehandedly address the challenge of racism. Doing so calls for a level of trust, collaboration, and multifaceted strategies among diverse populations, institutions, and communities that span and bridge many divides, including racial, ethnic, political, socioeconomic, and religious lines. There is no single strategy for healing racism and no one perspective on which all can agree. However, we are all called to play our part to bring about the “Beloved Community,” a phrase used by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to describe a society where “caring and compassion drive political policies that support the worldwide elimination of poverty and hunger and all forms of bigotry and violence.”⁴

This book gathers firsthand accounts of members of the CCC recalling their experience in resisting white supremacist violence during that “summer of hate” and seeking to repair the damage in the following months and years. Here is what

happened as we remember it, and here is how August 11 and 12 changed us and our congregations forever.

—Michael Cheuk, David Garth, and Elizabeth Emrey

Notes

¹ For information and other resources about this event, see the Wikipedia article “Charleston church shooting,” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charleston_church_shooting.

² “Charlottesville City Council votes to remove Lee statue,” *AP*, February 7, 2017, <https://news.yahoo.com/charlottesville-city-council-votes-remove-lee-statue-153332763.html>.

³ The Jefferson School City Center is a historic building that housed the Jefferson School, Charlottesville’s first high school for Black students. Today, the center houses the Jefferson School African American Heritage Center, the Carver Recreation Center, and local community organizations.

⁴ Quote taken from “Beloved Community Teach-in,” *The King Center*, <https://thekingcenter.org/what-we-do/beloved-community-teach-in/>.

The Birth of the Charlottesville Clergy Collective

Alvin Edwards

The Reverend Dr. **Alvin Edwards** has served the Mt. Zion First African Baptist Church for the last forty-one years. He is married to the former Barbara Singleton. They have four children, thirteen grandchildren, and three foster children.

The Charlottesville Clergy Collective (CCC) was birthed from the ashes of the tragic shooting and deaths at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church—lovingly called “Mother Emanuel”—in Charleston, South Carolina. Founded in 1816, it is the oldest African Methodist Episcopal church in the United States. It has long been a center for organizing events related to civil rights, including a 1962 meeting at which Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. urged church members to register and vote.

On June 17, 2015, members of Mother Emanuel welcomed a twenty-one-year-old visitor into their Wednesday night Bible study. Unbeknownst to them, he was a white supremacist who would open fire, killing nine and injuring three members of the church. Among the dead was the church’s senior pastor and state senator Clement C. Pinckney.

Unfortunately, this massacre was only the latest in a centuries-old pattern of violence in the United States. In response to some of these tragedies, I have led many prayer vigils as senior pastor of Mount Zion First African Baptist Church (FABC) in Charlottesville, Virginia. This was not the first mass shooting in American houses of worship, nor would it be the last. Between 2012 and 2017, there were fourteen church shootings in the US. Even the city of Charlottesville had a number of shootings, and one of the community’s responses was to hold a prayer vigil following each shooting. At one of the prayer vigil gatherings at Mt. Zion FABC, a Caucasian lady in her seventies approached me and said, “Reverend, I believe in prayer, but what else are you going to do?”

Those words haunted me from the moment she spoke them. I went to bed with them on my mind, and I woke up with them too. Her query would not depart from my memory. Later, I met with the Rev. George Morris, a chaplain for the Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) for the University of Virginia basketball and football teams. I don’t remember exactly how we got on the subject of the shootings; however, we decided to gather a group of pastors in Charlottesville and

hold a conversation about relationships among ministers in the Charlottesville-Albemarle area.

Before my arrival in Charlottesville in July 1981, a couple of pastors' groups had disbanded because of differences regarding desegregation. This new group would be different. It would accommodate all ethnicities. There was a chasm between relationships across denominational, religious affiliations, and, sadly, racial lines.

Beginning Conversations

On July 15, 2015, I hosted a breakfast. Approximately fifteen ministers and pastors of various races attended. We opened with prayer, and after everyone got their food, we began our conversation.

"If what happened at Mother Emanuel occurred here at Mt. Zion First African Baptist Church, how many of you would I have called?" I asked.

After a moment of awkward silence, I answered, "None of you."

One pastor asked, "Why?"

"Because I don't know you and we have no relationship," I said. "When I get in trouble, I want to be around people whom I know and who know me and will be there for me. And many of you do not know me. You haven't shown up at the prayer vigils. I don't see you over in the lower-income communities, especially where the shootings have taken place."

During the breakfast meeting, the pastors and ministers made many statements and asked many questions. They wanted to know where the group was headed and how it would get there.

Initial Questions and Ideas

At first, I thought some of the questions were somewhat superfluous. I thought the questions and statements related to "security plans," "what white people don't know," and "white guilt" were unnecessary. But on second thought, I realized these questions needed to be addressed in a way that didn't discourage dialogue. So I began viewing all the questions and statements as genuine. But did they get at the core issue of our concern for having authentic relationships? I knew that sometimes you have to talk and work through unnecessary stuff to get to the real issues of race. And so I decided not to condemn but to seek more information by continuing the dialogue.

I initially envisioned this group to be made up of Christian pastors because they were the ones I invited to the first meeting. However, after we had met for a while, the word got out and members from other faith traditions began participating.

We held our second meeting on August 18, 2015, at Mt. Zion FABC. Approximately fourteen people attended, and I summarized the previous meeting and discussions continued. We talked about the lack of commitment to racial justice among clergy in our community. Beginning in September, we held additional meetings. The numbers of attendees increased, and it became more diverse with other faith traditions joining us. But right-wing fundamentalists stopped participating.

After a series of meetings, we formally organized the group known as Charlottesville Clergy Collective (CCC). We are an eclectic group of ministers that crosses the spectrum of race, gender, and beliefs.

The Role of the Charlottesville Clergy Collective

We adopted this mission statement and continue to adhere to it:

Our Vision: The Charlottesville Clergy Collective seeks to be an interfaith community of prayer, solidarity, and impact within the Charlottesville-Albemarle Region of Central Virginia.

Our Mission: Our mission is to establish, develop, and promote racial, economic, and other justice and equity issues within the faith leadership and wider community of the Charlottesville-Albemarle Region through fellowship, collaborative partnership, relationship-building, and public witness.

The “summer of hate” got more contentious and forced us to gather in my church over breakfast to talk about racism and white supremacy in a safe place. And it forced us out into the streets to confront and actually take a stand against racism and white supremacy. The CCC gave us a safe place to talk openly about racism and white supremacy. We gave various faith traditions a way to publicly respond that was consistent and authentic with their beliefs.