

Statement by South Coast leaders of faith and social equality

Staff Writer

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We, South Coast leaders of faith and leaders for social equality, come together to affirm the heart of our different traditions - we all are made equally in the image of the divine, all life is sacred, and every human being is our neighbor, worthy of love.

Despite this common truth, we as a nation consciously or unconsciously deny that our society is structured in ways that gives privilege to people who are born white and disfavors those who are not.

The pain, anger, and heartbreak manifesting today in the United States of America started 400 years ago when human beings were first stolen from Africa and enslaved for forced labor. Fellow human beings, deprived of all rights, were considered property that could be treated brutally, raped, and disposed of at will by predominantly white owners.

White dominance continued after the Civil War as the North, imposing its own restrictions on newly emancipated people, was complicit with the failure of reconstruction in the South. The whole nation promulgated laws and practices that disenfranchised all African Americans.

Both northern and southern states deliberately created exclusive zoning and red lining, forcibly displacing African American lawful owners. Budgets for education, healthcare, housing, and social services in predominantly black neighborhoods were severely and deliberately curtailed. Suppression of the black vote, especially egregious in the Jim Crow South, was also practiced in the North.

Police forces, derived from posses to chase runaway slaves, were created largely to keep white neighborhoods “safe” from incursion by non-whites. The use of force in enforcement is considered an acceptable norm. The selective application of laws by the criminal justice system promotes mass incarceration of the black community.

We also acknowledge that the violence against people of color harkens to the license white settlers took in the mass slaughter and dislocation of indigenous people while appropriating their lands. The disregard for basic human rights is part of our birthright as a nation.

Many of us do not even acknowledge or understand that we have subliminally accepted the structure of a society that gives privilege to those who are born white. We ignorantly proclaim innocence or reject responsibility - “I am not a racist,” “I am color blind,” “I have black friends,” and “All Lives Matter,” all the while benefiting from easy credit, easy hiring and promotions for work, forgiveness for minor infractions; all that are not afforded to people of color.

Structural injustices need to be dismantled piece by piece. Given the immense challenge of our past and our present, we affirm another core belief of our faith traditions - we are called to work for justice. We see hope in this moment, believing this time to be another turning point in true racial justice. Though the arc is long it bends towards justice.

We express our solidarity with and gratitude to activists and protestors in the SouthCoast and across our nation. We know that silence is complicity, and we are deeply grateful for your voice and witness.

Some of us have worked many years and some are just awakening, but now awake we vow to not go back to sleep. We are committed to work together for racial and social justice. Our specific commitments vary depending on our racial and institutional positions, yet we know that it requires listening and truth-telling, humility and urgency, sincerity and resolve.

We commit to honest, open, and challenging conversation, while we continue doing our homework, educating ourselves about the many ways that white favoritism and structural racism are woven into the history and fabric of our nation and our lives.

We will work with our faith communities and social networks to explicitly engage in public education and dialogue around the issues of white privilege, anti-blackness, and structural racism. Our work for social justice is inseparably tied to our faith traditions. Speaking in one voice against hatred and ignorance, our interfaith and inter-organizational cooperation is strong.

We call on others in our community, especially those in positions of leadership and law enforcement, to intentionally and critically review how we, as institutions and individuals, continue to perpetuate racism and white privilege in our laws and our practices.

Beyond examining our hearts and our relationships, our laws must also be revisited. We commit to being informed about, involved in, and acting on public policy and legislation that will address systemic issues.

As the headlines shift focus, we vow together to continue our focus on this sacred internal and external work. We call on all in our communities to look inward, confess those things that we have done, or have not done. We pledge to come to the table and collaborate together in the long, hard work of anti-racism and social justice.

Faithfully,

Reverend Darryl D. Malden, Pastor Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church, Fall River

The Rev. Christopher R. Morck, Grace Episcopal Church, New Bedford

Rev David Lupo, sccc, Pastor, St. Mary's Church, Fairhaven

Reverend MaryAnn Purtill, Ordained Minister of The United Church of Christ, Southern New England Conference

The Rev. Melissa Howell, Curate, Grace Episcopal Church, New Bedford

The Rev. Dr. Virginia H. Child, United Church of Christ Pastor

Sister Marianna Sylvester, RSM, parishioner, Our Lady of the Assumption Church, New Bedford

Rabbi Raphael Kanter, Tifereth Israel Congregation, New Bedford

Rev. Jordinn Nelson Long, Lead minister, Unitarian Universalist Society of Fairhaven

Deborah Zane, Pastoral Associate, Catholic Collaborative of Central Fall River

Karen Andersen, Minister, First Unitarian in New Bedford

Rev. Jim Hornsby, Rector Emeritus

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Fall River

The Rev Jack H Haney, Grace Episcopal Church, New Bedford

Reverend Paul H. Wheeler, Trinity Lutheran Church, Fairhaven

The Reverend Alan R. Hesse, Christ Church Swansea

Rev. David A. Lima, Executive Minister, Inter-Church Council of Greater New Bedford

The Rev. Emily J. Kellar, United Church of Christ

Fr. Philip C. Jacobs, OGS (Retired)

New Bedford Human Relations Commission

United Interfaith Action of Southeastern MA

The Rev. Susan H. Lee, Ph.D., Rector, and the Vestry, St Luke's Episcopal Church, Fall River

The Rev. M Lise Hildebrandt, Interim Priest, and the Vestry, Church of the Holy Spirit, Fall River

Very Rev. Thomas Washburn , CATHOLIC COMMUNITY OF CENTRAL FALL RIVER, Rector: Cathedral of Saint Mary of the Assumption, Pastor: Good Shepherd Parish and Saint Stanislaus Parish

Martin Bentz, Outreach Coordinator, Islamic Society of Southeastern Massachusetts

Cantor Nathaniel Schudrich, Tifereth Israel Congregation, New Bedford

Westport Monthly Meeting of Friends

Rev. Donald S. Mier, retired

The NAACP, New Bedford Branch

Rev. David P. Reid ss.cc. Parochial Administrator, Our Lady of the Assumption, New Bedford

Rev. Bette McClure, United Church of Christ Minister

Rev. Paul Langston-Daley, Unitarian Universalist Society of Fairhaven

Gail Fortes, Executive Director, YWCA Southeastern MA

Rev. Dr. Amy Lignitz Harken, Minister, DOC/UCC

Cantor Shoshana Brown, Temple Beth El, Fall River

Rabbi Mark Elber, Temple Beth El, Fall River

Dax Crocker, South Coast Lead Organizer, Episcopal City Mission

Maria A. Rosario, Executive Director, NorthStar Learning Center, New Bedford

Deena Kinsky, Clerk, Mattapoisett Friends Meeting
The Reverend Charles Cloy, Pastor, Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church, New
Bedford
Rev. Scott A. Ciosek, St. Peter's Episcopal Church, Dartmouth
Union Baptist Church, New Bedford
Rev. David A. Buehler, O.S.M.
Rev. John Centeio
Helena DaSilva Hughes, Executive Director, Immigrants Assistance Center
Rev. Steven Rodrigues, Senior Pastor, His Mercy Church, New Bedford

<https://www.southcoasttoday.com/news/20200927/naacp-interfaith-group-members-share-experiences-with-area-police>

NAACP, Interfaith group members share experiences with area police

By [Kiernan Dunlop](#)

Posted Sep 27, 2020 at 5:01 AM Updated at 7:25 AM

NB and FR mayors and police chiefs invited, but only Fall River chief participates in forum to discuss police reform

When Moriah Wiggins made her way to an event in Fall River she was prepared for a fun and social evening, but instead she ended the night barefoot in a cold cell.

The UMass Dartmouth graduate and NAACP New Bedford Branch member was going to a school sanctioned event hosted by the college's African Students Association. Police arrived while she was waiting in line.

The police began to "aggressively move students to disperse," according to Wiggins, and she said her nightmare began when she asked an officer not to push her friend.

"In that moment I was only seen by my color, a color that was not worth respect or decency, I was just another black youth who had the nerve to question the people I expected to protect me, another black woman who wondered what I had done to deserve this," Wiggins said.

Two officers handcuffed Wiggins and pushed her up against a car, she said. "I was scared and crying...it seemed like I was being arrested as a show of force."

After being brought to a cell with her friend that night, eventually all charges were dropped, Wiggins said, but she was left with the trauma of that evening.

"It took me months to get over what really happened, to be able to share my story without wanting to cry," she said.

Wiggins, who graduated from UMass Dartmouth with a degree in bioengineering, said she describes herself as a community leader who always works hard and plays by the rules.

She shared her story Thursday night at a community action meeting on police reform and racial equity held by United Interfaith Action of Southeastern MA (UIA) in partnership with the NAACP, New Bedford Branch.

The purpose of the meeting was to bring elected officials and police chiefs together with the community to hear their experiences with police and address areas of police reform.

Both the Fall River Mayor and New Bedford mayor declined an invitation to attend the meeting, according to NAACP New Bedford Branch Vice President Renee Ledbetter, because they said the two cities are different, with their own unique issues that require different solutions.

Ledbetter said the purpose of the meeting was to bring two common cities together for common action and resolutions can't stop at the city line.

Elaina Pevide, a spokesperson for the Fall River Mayor's Office, said via email on Friday that as of Thursday evening Mayor Paul Coogan had not received an invitation to participate in the meeting nor did he or his office receive any correspondence or phone calls to confirm his attendance at the meeting.

"It was the mayor's understanding that last [night's] meeting was with the New Bedford and Fall River Police Chiefs," Pevide said, "We apologize for any misunderstanding and Mayor Coogan looks forward to future meeting with UIA."

New Bedford Public Information Office Jonathan Carvalho said Mayor Jon Mitchell agreed to attend a New Bedford forum put on by UIA, but that UIA declined to hold one specific to New Bedford and that it was accurate that Mitchell declined to attend Thursday night's meeting because it included both cities.

Both Carvalho and UIA confirmed that Mitchell participated in an earlier meeting with UIA and the NAACP New Bedford branch to discuss having the larger meeting held Thursday.

New Bedford Police Chief Joseph Cordeiro was originally scheduled to attend, but according to Ledbetter he later informed them he could no longer attend.

On Friday afternoon, Andrea Sheppard Lomba of UIA said via email, "I also wanted to underscore that from our initial engagement the city officials had agreed to meet with our organizations, they just ultimately wanted the meeting to

be separated by cities. So there was never an outright ‘no’ to meeting with us, it was a disagreement with the meeting happening with the two cities together.”

Ultimately, Fall River Police Chief Jeffrey Cardoza was the only official who attended Thursday night’s meeting to hear testimonials and answer the community’s questions about accountability and representation, demilitarizing the police, re-envisioning policing, and reinvesting funds.

Ledbetter encouraged the over 120 attendees to call and send emails to elected officials to voice their concerns and ask them why they didn’t attend.

Wiggins shared her testimony in a section of the meeting calling for the demilitarization of police.

“We need police to be community partners in public safety and not community warriors,” attendee Nancy Costa said.

Rhoda Purcell, UIA member and New Bedford resident, asked Cardoza if he would commit to supporting training officers at least once per year in implicit and racial bias, cultural understanding, and de-escalation.

Cardoza said that it is his intention to set aside part of the mandatory annual training for officers for training of that nature.

Later in the meeting Cardoza said that since he became chief, he’s been “preaching that we are guardians, not warriors, I don’t need warriors on this police department.”

UIA and the NAACP New Bedford branch members also asked Cardoza for his stance on civilian review boards with subpoena power, all police wearing body cameras, and a phone line independent of the police department where citizens could make complaints about police officers.

New Bedford Branch President LaSella Hall called attention to the recent decision by the Kentucky Attorney General’s office not to file charges against any police officers in the killing of 26 year-old Breonna Taylor in her own home, with only one officer indicted for reckless endangerment for firing into a neighbor’s apartment.

The decision, Hall said, evidenced that “The police cannot continue to police themselves.”

Cardoza said he was not in favor of a civilian review board with subpoena power, but is open to an advisory committee.

The mayor's office already receives phone calls about issues with officers, according to Cardoza, though there's not a specific line for complaints.

"Relative to the body-worn camera I would like to see every single police officer including myself have a body-worn camera," Cardoza said, and he's been discussing a pilot program with Mayor Coogan in which a group of officers would wear body cameras.

Throughout the night UIA and NAACP members continued to share their personal experiences with police officers while Cardoza answered questions about possible police reform.

Kelli Johnson, a UIA member, shared her experience teaching in New Bedford.

Johnson works at Whaling City Alternative School, where students who are removed from the traditional school system end up in New Bedford.

She described how students enter school every day by taking their shoes off before going through metal detectors and being patted down.

"It's like we're already preparing them for prison," Johnson said.

Johnson then described an incident she witnessed 15 years ago at Keith Middle School.

A School Resource Office (SRO) grabbed a young boy and slammed him to the floor.

"I could see the pleas for help as he looked into my eyes," Johnson said, "To this day I can still see his look of fear."

Johnson was using her experience to call for new ways to accomplish public safety, and called for the possibility of emphasizing the role of mentors over SROs at schools.

Cardoza said he is a huge proponent of the SRO program and supports it 100%, citing hundreds of situations he knows of in which SROs were able to prevent crimes from happening outside of the school due to their presence there.

"They know that they're there to build relationships, they're not there as armed guards," Cardoza said.

The chief did say he would be willing to get together with a group of people to discuss the SRO program, but he does not support eliminating the program.

Over the course of the evening Cardoza said he would work to use the Civil Service Waiver to increase diversity and allow the hiring of more bilingual officers and committed to 7 of 8 policies in “8 Can’t Wait,” a set of eight policies that a 2016 Campaign Zero study found can decrease police violence by 72%.

Mitchell and Cordeiro have already committed to the eight policies in New Bedford.

The one policy in “8 Can’t Wait” that Cardoza didn’t agree to was the officers be required to provide some type of warning before using deadly force.

Cardoza said he didn’t want to make an officer have to wait to announce his use of deadly force if he or she was under fire, since he didn’t think it would be fair to the officer.

UIA and NAACP New Bedford Branch members were clear that last night’s meeting was only the beginning.

“Tonight is a first step in a large step towards justice,” Ledbetter said.



Interfaith group hosting meeting with mayor, police chief on racial justice in policing

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A virtual meeting will be held on Thursday by the Fall River-based **United Interfaith Action** group featuring New Bedford Mayor Jon Mitchell and Chief of Police Joe Cordeiro on the topic of racial justice in policing.



The meeting begins at 6:30 p.m. and those interested in taking part can register by visiting bit.ly/uiacamdec3.

“When George Floyd was murdered in Minneapolis, New Bedford residents took to the streets to peacefully protest such conduct and call for deep changes,” a press release from United Interfaith Action (UIA) stated. “Now we move to the needed policy changes to keep everyone safe and so justice for all is done. We move from protest to policy so we have the power of justice for all.”

On Sept. 24, UIA held a largely attended meeting with Fall River Police Chief Jeffrey Cardoza.

“It was a positive meeting and Chief Cardoza agreed to work for many of the proposals that UIA brought to him that night,” the release states.

Earlier this week, UIA organized a meeting with Fall River Mayor Paul Coogan “as a next step in our work on racial equity in policing. Now we are meeting with New Bedford Mayor Jon Mitchell and Police Chief Joseph Cordeiro on these critical issues.”

“We believe this is a time for all institutions, City Hall, police departments, schools, universities, hospitals, companies to reckon with their policies and practices that create racial disparities and lessened opportunities.”

Proposals will be made in a number of areas to strengthen safety for all and make our police departments as good as we need them to be, the release states.

Those areas include:

- Community Representation of our diversity
- Community Accountability of our Police Departments
- Training Initiatives & Demilitarization
- Re-Investing Funds in our community
- Re-envisioning policing, public safety, and community peace-keeping

UIA is made up of religious congregations “putting faith into action since 1996.”

The group’s work has included “expanding after school programs and ESOL and GED programs, improving public safety, helping get two increases passed in the minimum wage law, and helping pass the Paid Family Medical Leave law taking effect on Jan. 1.”

UIA says the group’s current focal areas are education, immigration, addiction and public safety/police reform.