Engaging hate online: Respond & reframe

By Adam J. Copeland
February 2, 2015

When pastors make the news, it's often bad (e.g. murderous DUI, sexual abuse, or curious stunts). It was particularly interesting, then, to read the positive coverage of #usemeinstead—initially positive, at least.

As Elahe Izadi wrote in *The Washington Post* on January 25,

> The idea originated on a closed Facebook group for Lutheran clergy, where pastors were discussing how North Miami Beach's police department had been caught using mugshots of actual people for target practice.
> Let's send in our own photos for target practice, the pastors decided.

Great idea, right? Well, maybe not. You see, over 90 percent of ELCA clergy are white. So, the more they added to the hashtag, the more it seemed like it was a campaign to replace black faces with white faces. Often from the comfort and privilege of a pastor's office in a heated church building, white clergy posted their pictures with the hashtag #usemeintead.

Whether despite or because of our privileged positions in a culture that centers on whiteness, the campaign caught on. Hundreds joined the movement even as a corresponding debate began about the "white savior complex."

Victoria Weinstein (a.k.a. PeaceBang) had a rather scathing response:

> Replacing black faces with white faces in order to call attention to racial profiling is insulting and actually racist. Do I need to even say this? The symbolism of covering the images of young black men who live with the real danger of racial profiling with images of comfortable, smiling white people is disturbing. #BlackLivesMatter does not need more well-meaning white people crowding in front of the camera waving their hands and saying, "Look at me!"

While Carol Kuruvilla (HuffPost) and Eric Krupke (PBS *NewsHour*) covered the controversy, eventually, it came out that Wil Gafney, a professor at Brite Divinity School, helped begin the movement:

> I (as an African American) and the black pastor who co-started this movement in conversation with her white colleagues disagree with the way the project has been characterized here and elsewhere. It's been interesting to watch what was a joint effort of black and white clergy allies become a white people's project. As the meme-ing distorted the project its founders relinquished it. It did not start as a white savior project. We had a twitter conversation with Broderick and another African American scholar about our difference of opinion and one side of that conversation became "the" black response. I respect Broderick and others who are troubled by it, especially what it became. But the entire affair and the role of many pastors who I knew personally and quite frankly educated is not that simple. There were layers to this beyond the superficial one that took over twitter.

Whew. What's a well-meaning, privileged faith leader to do? Is Twitter just not a place to engage these complicated questions of racial justice?

Indeed, these questions are complex, so I'll respond timidly. First, a comment about digital culture.

It's important to note that the participatory, networked nature of new media necessarily makes a movement like this impossible to control by those who start it. Once something trends online, it's actually pretty difficult to find where it began. So, let's start with the assumption that engagement in new media advocacy assumes a lack of control over the message (e.g. the #ImARepublican fail).

Now that we've noted the difficulty of staying on-message, let's push on. What approach, then, should we chose?

Last week I attended a fantastic consultation hosted by the New Media Project. During some unofficial business over adult beverages with Keith Anderson, Mihee Kim-Kort, and Laura Everett, I spouted off a proto-theory of new media engagement. It goes something like this.

When engaging injustice online, Christian leaders should respond and reframe.

Step one: respond. Not always, but often. Usually. The worst possible outcome of the #usemeinstead campaign pushback would be more white people sitting on the sidelines while young black men die. Just because responding requires pausing and giving careful thought does not mean we should shy away. In fact, the complexities of seeking justice today call for *more* faith-filled, impassioned responses by clergy, not less.

At the New Media Project Consultation I heard several stories in which the choice to respond to a difficult situation online led to positive outcomes for all. For example, in one online community, a carefully worded e-mail to a frequent vitriolic online commenter, and the conversation that followed, led the commenter to dial back his offensive language for many months to come.

Certainly, we don't always have the time, energy, or wisdom to respond to every injustice online, but, overall, we're called to respond. At the risk of cheapening Martin Luther King's phrase, if "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere," surely the "anywhere" applies to digital spaces as well.

So, first step, respond. Now comes the trick. I believe faith leaders are also called to **step two: reframe the debate online**. Responding isn't enough. Instead, we must try to reframe the conversation in ways of justice, kindness, humility, and Christian love.

Perhaps this was the problematic part of the #usemeinstead campaign. The movement suggested a relatively simple, tit-for-tat response rather than a reframing. As my colleague David Creech wondered aloud last week: what about #dontshootpeople as a hashtag? Faith leaders should seek to use digital tools to elevate the online conversation.

For a rather simplistic example, *Gathering Voices* blog comes to mind. Their comment policy reframes the traditional "stop being a jerk" comment policies to a " Blogging Beatitudes" that include things like, "Blessed are those who refuse to insult or slander others, even if they have been disrespected themselves. They show us all a better way."

I wonder, then, how faith leaders can build digital skills and instincts for faithful reframing of hot-button issues. Reframing is not changing #blacklivesmatter to

#alllivesmatter. Rather, reframing pushes the conversation to another level of depth and insight. It moves us from simple to complex thinking, from a hashtag to consciousness raising, to informed dialogue and further response.

Reframing is always hard, especially in digital culture (Jesus was an expert at it, by the way). Digital justice-seeking is not only a worthy endeavor, it’s a faithful one. It calls us to take time for thoughtful digital responses, to employ the power of the Internet to reframe and elevate the conversation.

Originally posted at A Wee Blether