Faith leaders on the front lines in Charlottesville

An interfaith group of clergy gathered alongside anti-racist and anti-fascist activists countering white supremacist and neo-Nazi protesters.

by Celeste Kennel-Shank in the September 13, 2017 issue

An interfaith group of clergy on August 12 in Charlottesville, Virginia, where white supremacist and neo-Nazi protesters were gathering. Photo by Steven Martin/National Council of Churches.

What happened in Charlottesville, Virginia, on August 11–12 drew a strong response from local faith leaders, but it was "not just a local moment," said Seth Wispelwey, an organizer of clergy efforts when white nationalists and neo-Nazis rallied in his hometown.

"White supremacy is woven into our country's DNA," he said in comments on the event gathered by the National Council of Churches. In efforts to counter racism,

“the white church must help lead.”

An interfaith group of hundreds of clergy gathered alongside Black Lives Matter activists and other antiracist and antifascist groups resisting the white supremacist efforts. Churches also provided care for those harmed by the day’s violence, which included a man driving his car into the counterprotesters, killing one woman and injuring dozens. Two state police officers monitoring the rally died in a helicopter crash.

The Unite the Right rally on August 12, by some estimates the largest such demonstration in a decade, was held to oppose the Charlottesville city council’s decision to remove a statue of Confederate General Robert E. Lee from a city park, an action currently on hold because of a lawsuit.

The night before, people of faith held a prayer service at St. Paul’s Memorial Episcopal Church across from the University of Virginia Rotunda. Traci D. Blackmon, a national officer of the United Church of Christ, was among those who spoke at the standing-room-only service. Unexpectedly, across the street white nationalists gathered for a torch-lit rally, with many raising their arms in the Nazi salute. “A mob was approaching the church,” she told MSNBC, and it was chanting the Nazi slogan “blood and soil,” as well as “white lives matter” and “Jews will not replace us.”

Eventually those attending the prayer service were able to leave the church safely. The next day, after an early-morning worship service, a group of clergy committed to nonviolent direct action went to Emancipation Park, where the Unite the Right rally was to be held.

“We were trained . . . to greet all acts of violence with love and concern,” said Steven Martin, director of communications at the National Council of Churches. He added, “We didn’t have the numbers we were hoping for. We had hoped to have enough people to block the entrance to the park.”

If they had done that, they expected they would be arrested, and possibly beaten while standing without fighting back.

Instead, with the people they had, they stood in a line along the street with arms linked and sang and prayed.

Some of the white nationalists in the area bore Nazi insignia or Confederate flags, some wore the red “Make America Great Again” hats associated with the Trump campaign, and some carried guns, bats, or pepper spray. The groups marched down from a hill in the park and paraded in front of the faith leaders, Martin said.

“We were shouted at, we were argued with, we were mocked,” he said. “We didn’t engage them at all.”

Some of the rally attendees called the faith leaders “communists and heretics,” and shouted at the white clergy “Why don’t you turn and love your own people?”

Also gathering in the area were anti-fascist counter-protesters, many of them wearing padding and goggles.

“I would say they were prepared for violence,” Martin said.

Shortly before the rally was slated to begin, the city canceled it as an unlawful assembly, and some of the clergy left the area.

Some faith leaders remained, standing on the steps at the entrance of the park, singing “This Little Light of Mine,” when neo-Nazis began “to beat them and trample on them,” Blackmon told MSNBC. “The police were standing down,” and antifascist activists rescued the clergy. “They saved their lives,” Blackmon said.

Reflecting on the events a week later, Blackmon said the purpose of clergy coming together was to show what love looks like and to “not allow hatred to have the last word,” she wrote in an email. “The message of faith leaders in Charlottesville was not about statues. It was about love. We understand that the removal of statues is merely a symbolic gesture unless we commit ourselves to the transformative work of eradicating racist statutes, revisionist history, and white supremacy in this land.”

Alan Zimmerman, president of Congregation Beth Israel, whose rabbis were among clergy demonstrating, wrote on ReformJudaism.org. “It was a horrific and bloody scene. Soon, we learned that Nazi websites had posted a call to burn our synagogue. . . . Fortunately, it was just talk—but we had already deemed such an attack within the realm of possibilities, taking the precautionary step of removing our Torahs, including a Holocaust scroll, from the premises.”

First United Methodist Church, across the street from Emancipation Park, opened its doors to medical teams and to counterprotesters who were injured both physically

and psychologically, offering water, bandages, counseling, and prayers. Volunteers turned tables on their sides to create a buffer zone around the church, leaving only one entrance open, Phil Woodson, associate pastor, told United Methodist News Service.

“As horrible and scary as everything was,” Woodson said, “what will stay with me for the rest of my life is so very many good people coming together.”

Connor Kenaston, a graduate student at the University of Virginia, told UMNS he was frightened by how many of the white nationalists were men in their twenties and thirties.

Annette Flynn, a United Methodist minister from Tennessee who traveled to Charlottesville to be part of the clergy action, said in reflections gathered by the National Council of Churches: “I saw fear in the faces of the alt-right. I tried to look them in their eyes and they would not make eye contact. . . . What lies behind anger is often deep hurt.” *—Christian Century*

A version of this article, which was edited on August 25, appears in the September 13 print edition under the title “Clergy on the front lines in Charlottesville.”