

Texas church puts a literal spotlight on Black Lives Matter

by [Matt Jacob](#) in the [August 12, 2020](#) issue



Since June, Northaven United Methodist Church in north Dallas has been using its building to project the names of black people killed by the police. (Courtesy photo)

With its modern architectural exterior, Northaven United Methodist Church fits in nicely with its surroundings in the affluent Preston Hollow neighborhood of north Dallas. But since June, each night as the sun sets this building becomes center stage for a #BlackLivesMatter statement.

Social justice and activism have long been a part of the congregation's fabric, and George Floyd's death in Minneapolis on May 25 only stoked that fire. To wit: drive by after dark, and you'll see prophetic messages such as "Jesus Weeps" and "Say Their Names" interspersed among the names of nearly 50 individuals who have died in police custody or by racially motivated killings.

"This shows we can send a message to a community that probably otherwise will stay in their bubble and live in the status quo and not be exposed to anything uncomfortable," said Stan Broome, a Northaven UMC member and local attorney who came up with the idea. "We want to make people think. We see our location as an advantage, because if you're stopped at that red light, you can't ignore it."

It all started when Marti Soper, senior pastor at Northaven UMC, convened a committee of church members after the first protest in Minneapolis. Its singular mission: do something and do it fast.

The initial offering was a protest on the church grounds to accommodate people in the congregation who didn't feel safe going to downtown Dallas because of their health or age. It was well received and attracted participants ranging in age from 17 to 90.

"When we say the names, we are reminded that each of them had a story," Soper said. "Naming makes this issue of racism a personal matter for all of us and helps us see the urgency that white people have been reluctant to embrace. My prayer is that this witness will help our community stay engaged in the struggle for justice."

Broome pondered how they might expand the message's reach. Then he wondered aloud how he could string together something similar to what he'd seen done at hotels and larger conference settings.

Armed with extension cords, a cheap projector, his laptop, and a PowerPoint presentation, Broome set up his show. He also set up his lawn chair and, for the first few weeks, sat outside for about four hours each night to make sure everything went as planned and the equipment wasn't ruined by the elements.

Broome said he was surprised the first night that, from a technical perspective, it all worked. That was all the encouragement he needed to devise a permanent installation. In late June, the church hired an electrician, installed a weatherproof box for the projector—which is now mounted on a light pole—and began running the presentation off an iPad. This allows for on-the-fly edits, such as including Rayshard Brooks's name less than an hour after word began to spread about his death.

"While the overwhelming response has been positive, we certainly have had our fair share pull in and tell us in no uncertain terms how they don't support that movement and that we're on the wrong side of it," Broome said. "That is encouraging to us, because if we're not reaching those people, then what's the point?"

Broome and his family have been in Dallas for 20 years and, until last year, belonged to a different denomination. A trip with Broome's daughter to visit colleges prompted a family discussion about a potential church move. She noticed several

churches with Pride flags in front and asked him whether a church like that existed in Dallas.

Broome initially scoffed at the notion, but after his wife started doing research, the family found exactly what they were looking for in Northaven UMC: a church with intellectual rigor and a passion for social justice.

“Christ’s message is that we’re supposed to be fighting and giving voice to those who are marginalized,” Broome said. “I don’t see how you can read the Bible and not see how we are called to help marginalized and historically disenfranchised people.” —North Texas Conference of the United Methodist Church