

In wake of violence, Boston faith leaders band together



JONATHAN WIGGS/GLOBE STAFF

Rev. Pastor Dorlimar Lebron (middle) during a prayer at a Boston Interfaith gathering at the Twelfth Baptist Church.

By Lisa Wangsness | GLOBE STAFF JULY 09, 2016

More than 50 faith leaders from across Greater Boston came together Friday at Twelfth Baptist Church in Roxbury to pray for the families of police officers shot to death in Dallas and of African-American men fatally shot by police in St. Paul and Baton Rouge, La.

“No matter what occurs, it doesn’t give anybody any license to take lives or to injure humankind,” said the Rev. Arthur T. Gerald, senior pastor of Twelfth Baptist, where, as he noted, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. ministered when he was in Boston.

They also called for an end to racism and violence, and for justice.

“Oh, God, you’ve heard the cries of mothers in passenger seats, you’ve heard the angel from a 4-year-old voice, God you’ve heard the prayers from the convenience store, and you’ve heard the pain of those trying to protect and serve,” said the Rev. Willie Bodrick II, an assistant pastor at Twelfth Baptist. “God, you know the wounds that America keeps picking at. God, you know the peace that we need.”

The diverse group included several dozen Protestant clergy, about a dozen Roman Catholic priests, a rabbi, and a humanist chaplain. There were no Muslim representatives -- most mosques were holding Friday midday prayer service at about the same time -- but the Islamic Society of Boston Cultural Center in Roxbury sent its support.

Organizers who met after the prayers formed a new organization, the Boston Clergy Racial Justice Working Group, which plans to gather for dinner at Twelfth Baptist on July 14 to discuss next steps.

“As long as it leads somewhere,” said the Rev. Jeffrey Brown, a cofounder of the Boston TenPoint Coalition, who helped convene Friday’s gathering.

The clergy said their collaborative prayers sent a message of solidarity and protest to their congregations, and to the broader public.

“What you see in front of you today is a web of relationship, of connection, and that springs forth from a religious tradition that each of us has . . . and that speaks of love,” said Rabbi Elaine Zecher, senior rabbi of Temple Israel in Boston.

“God has nothing to do with this violence,” she said. “My prayer is to ourselves, in this land, in this country, that we get our acts together and stop hating.”

The Rev. Laura Everett, executive director of the Massachusetts Council of Churches, read part of the anguished appeals to God from Diamond Reynolds in the aftermath of her boyfriend’s shooting. Philando Castile was shot by a police officer in Minnesota, as the couple’s young daughter watched.

“ ‘We are innocent,’ ” Everett quoted Reynolds saying, as recorded in a video broadcast on Facebook. “ ‘My 4-year-old can tell you this.’ ”

Many of the clergy stayed long after the prayer meeting to strategize about what they could do to address violence and racism.

Some resolved to join the daily neighborhood peace walks in Roxbury and Dorchester, in which small groups of parishioners stroll together, often chatting with the people they meet. Police or city officials often join in, said Twelfth Baptist’s Gerald.

In the exchanges, he said, “We see the human side of each other.”

Several public prayer vigils have already been scheduled around Boston in the coming days. The clergy group decided not to organize any additional services of its own. Instead, they agreed to meet for dinner in the next week or so to work on further strategies -- including, possibly, to plan conversations about racism in Boston.

“I would be willing to enter into any deeper dialogue around race if, at the end of the dialogue, there is movement, there is action,” Brown said. “Can we just get to a place where we are moving somewhere?”

In the meantime, the Rev. Jay Williams, of the Union United Methodist Church in the South End, said he was trying to prepare for Sunday, when he must address the

“They’re speechless. They’re like, ‘We want you to preach,’ ” he said. “I’m like, ‘I’ve got nothing for you. I’ve preached this sermon before.’ ”

The Rev. Laura Ruth Jarrett, of Hope Central Church in Jamaica Plain, urged ministers of predominantly white congregations to use the words “white supremacy” in describing the racial problems afflicting America. Many white people, she said, are “like children” in their obliviousness to the realities of racism in America.

Clergy, she said, need to help their white congregants face those realities, “and then minister to them in their brokenheartedness.”

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