Columns
Social Justice



A group of sisters protesting for Black Lives Matter (Courtesy of Sylvania Ohio Franciscans)



by Karen Jean Zielinski

Contributor

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It started on May 25, 2020, the day George Floyd died at the hands of the Minneapolis Police Department.

I heard of this tragedy when I turned on my television to check the local news. I saw a clip of a Black man on the ground with a knee on his neck. I literally gasped and thought, "He can't breathe! Get off him!" I couldn't believe what I was seeing.

Floyd, a 46-year-old Black American man, had allegedly used a counterfeit bill. Derek Chauvin, a white police officer, knelt on Floyd's neck for almost eight minutes while Floyd was handcuffed and lying face down, begging for his life and repeatedly saying "I can't breathe."

In response to this racial tragedy, my congregation, the Sisters of St. Francis of Sylvania, Ohio, invited us — Sisters, Associates, employees and friends — to take a stand on healing racial injustice. The Sylvania Franciscan Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation (or JPIC) Network invited us to respond to George Floyd's killing, so we in suburban Sylvania, Ohio, tried to take a peaceful stance with two small groups. One group met and prayed in Our Lady Queen of Peace Chapel every day, from 12:15-12:30 p.m., as a corporate witness of the Sylvania Franciscan desire to heal racial injustice — in ourselves, in our country, in our world.

The other group would join them in vigil on the corner of our property. Sylvania Franciscan Sisters, Associates, partners in ministry and friends witnessed, holding a variety of signs: "Black Lives Matter," "eracism," "O God, Change Our Hearts" and others.

This was 15 minutes during the lunch hour, and just twice a week.

Since our gentle protest happened during the pandemic stay-at-home shutdown, I decided to ride my electric cart to the corner, pick up a sign and make a stand for peace. I had never been involved in a protest before.

I kept informed about current social justice issues by reading about climate change, death penalty statistics, current boycotts of stores and companies, refugees, human trafficking, recycling, and anything that came from our well-informed JPIC Office. I sent faxes and wrote to elected officials, boycotted stores and shared my reason for boycotting with people who asked, but I never stood out publicly with a sign.

And then I did.

I joined the group, about 10-15 people every Monday and Wednesday, because I truly believed that by standing on the corner, I was keeping the message of racial injustice in front of all of us. As the weeks went on, people gradually returned to their jobs, and our numbers dwindled, but there were always people there.

Sometimes people honked their horns in support or waved. At other times, some drivers told us to get jobs, yelled that "*all* lives matter," and sometimes swore at us, or gave us the nasty finger sign. I became used to the responses, and was only really bothered when one man kept yelling that "*all* lives matter" (which we agreed with) while two children rode in the back of his car. It struck me that his children were being taught some angry attitudes. That bothered me.

After months of carrying my sign on the street corner, I wondered why I continued showing up. Was I doing it because it was a politically correct thing to do, something I could speak about at the office water cooler? First, I believed I was being honest with my beliefs that many Black lives were treated as if they did not matter. I was called to protest because I passionately felt that I needed to say something about wrongdoing. I feel the same way when an injustice or a wrongdoing occurs. When an event moves me, I write a letter to an editor, make a phone call or speak to the person to explain my view. Standing on this corner is that for me.



Sister Karen Jean Zielinski protests for Black Lives Matter in her motorized chair. (Courtesy of Sylvania Ohio Franciscans)

I wondered again: Does protesting accomplish anything? Maybe not. But on the other hand, our motley group is raising awareness on various issues. Our world is still just as entrenched in racism and violence, but our presence might have sparked some honest conversations. We all need to speak with each other, not just hearing angry conversations shouted out at us. Can we talk?

As a writer and communications person, I see the good of keeping the message before the public. It reminds me of watching a television ad which reminds me to attend an event or buy something at a local market. Sometimes the message at our protests is carried on by protestors talking to each other about injustices — a type of word-of-mouth marketing which years ago, helped launch Nike sneaker sales.

Although our corner witness was small and might not touch a large audience, I knew in my heart it could change people. I realized that we might never know if we changed a person's heart, made them think about racial injustice, speak about it or

even change their views. A person's values and spiritual side are hard to measure.

It reminded me of teaching high school music students. I wondered if choral music changed their lives. Does this experience make a difference in their lives? Does it make them a more balanced, loving person? I don't know, because it is so hard to evaluate a person's affect. How do we measure attitudes? I remembered Emily Dickinson's words, "If I can stop one heart from breaking, I shall not live in vain."

On the measurable, scientific side of this protest, I wondered if standing on the corner would help change anything for the good. Other protests, like the women's suffrage movement took 70 years before it won voting rights for women (the 19th Amendment). The civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s eventually led to monumental changes, including the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and the 26th Amendment. The Americans with Disabilities Act, or the ADA, was eventually passed in the '90s after years of street protests. Of course, just because something is a law doesn't mean it is lived out.

But when I am standing outside, I feel connected with my fellow sign holders, and am encouraged when they share hopeful ideas for change. This corner ministry forces me to examine my own values on race, diversity and acceptance.

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By some calculations, more than 15 million Americans have taken part in protesting racial violence, supporting the message of Black Lives Matter.

I know that what I do on my little protest corner comes from my inner core, my beliefs. I feel that — with my sign — I am living what I stand for.

When people drive by and shout at us, that is only part of the protest. We both need to talk about our different beliefs. But many passersby do not engage with us. Conversation has to be two-way.

So many times, when we say "Black Lives Matter" on our corner, others say that "all lives matter." Of course, all lives matter. Just because we support something doesn't mean we exclude another thing. If I say I value my country, that doesn't mean I do not value another one.

We need to talk.

This story appears in the **Sustainable Development Goal 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions** feature series. View the full series.