

Clergy Group Press Release

Local Clergy Association Speaks Out

The Southbridge/Sturbridge Clergy Association finds it hard to breathe as they add their voices and their hearts to all those who are grieved and appalled by recent events. We can best express it by adapting with permission the words of our sister in Christ, Rev. Valeria Schmidt of Trinity Church, UCC in Northborough. Last Sunday was Pentecost, a normally joyous celebration of breath and of fire. But today, we can't breathe. We want to breathe in the Spirit of God, the Spirit of love and community and diversity, but we can't breathe.

As we watch churches and our Sacred Texts used (without permission or consideration) as politicized photo op props. We can't breathe.

When we think about George Floyd, and Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery, and the many, many more black and brown people who have been killed by white police officers, or former police officers. We can't breathe.

When we read the hateful comments online about how they are rioting and looting and destroying other people's property. We can't breathe.

The Holy Spirit comes with tongues of fire. Tongues of fire were burning down businesses in Minneapolis as acts of protest against centuries of systemic racism, oppression and violence against people of color. We're not condoning acts of violent protest. But when we see how the police reacted to peaceful protests by people of color: with rubber bullets, tear gas and water cannons, in comparison to how they reacted to screaming white people sporting guns at city halls all over the country because they wanted businesses to open up again – we can't breathe.

When we hear George Floyd cry out to his mother it reminds us of how Jesus took care of his mother in his dying moment on the cross, and we can't breathe. Eric Garner said the same thing six years ago before he died at the hands of police: "I can't breathe." And nothing has changed.

When we feel we feel our hearts pounding because we know we are offending people who are police officers or have a police officer in their family, we can't breathe. We're *not* making a blanket statement about any individual police officer. We're talking about the institution with its cover-ups and the ignoring of complaints and the lack of vetting and training of future officers. We can't breathe. As white men and women. White, Christian, straight, middle-class, privileged men and women. We can't breathe. And we can't remain silent. [...]

God, forgive us for remaining silent much too long. Forgive us for enjoying our freedom and privileges while others are dying every single day. Forgive us our lack of courage to speak up from the pulpit, even the virtual pulpit, because we don't want to make anyone uncomfortable, because we don't want to face criticism or conflict.

Forgive us white Americans who have benefited far too long from an unjust and racist system.

Send Your Spirit on us, with tongues of fire and loud and rushing wind, to inspire and encourage us to speak, and to act. But send also Your Spirit of listening and understanding so we will truly hear what our brothers and sisters of color need from us, and so we will hear which way You want us to go.

Help us to breathe, God. Help us.

In His Service,

Rev. Kathryn Light, Elm St. Congregational, UCC, Southbridge (chair)

Rev. Dr. Janet Peck, New Hope United Church of Christ, Sturbridge

Rev. Dan Purtell, Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Sturbridge

Fr. Richard Signore, Holy Trinity Episcopal Church, Southbridge

Pastor Sabina Terrades, Southbridge United Methodist Church, Southbridge