

Ministers form coalition to push for racial justice in Spotsylvania and Fredericksburg area

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Moe Petway, president of the Spotsylvania NAACP (center), speaks during a May 30 rally in the city. File / Mike Morones / The Free Lance-Star

Several local Black ministers have formed a coalition that hopes to unify various factions and make sure there is accountability that brings positive changes to promote social and racial justice.

The group's formation started after Mozett Petway, a pastor at House of Blessings Church and the president of the Spotsylvania County chapter of the NAACP, approached the Rev. Charles Wormley, a lifelong Spotsylvania resident.

The group started with several Spotsylvania pastors, but has since grown to about 24 members, some of which are in other localities in the Fredericksburg area. The group calls itself the Ministers Coalition of Spotsylvania and Surrounding Counties for Social Change.

Several of those involved with the coalition spoke at a June community meeting with the Spotsylvania Board of Supervisors, which agreed to establish an ad-hoc committee to keep lines of communication open on the issues raised by the group.

Petway told the supervisors he is worried about the future of the younger African American generation and how they are treated by police, who he said are seen in the Black community as the traditional “tool” for enforcing unjust limitations on them.

The coalition is diverse, with “men and women, black and white,” from numerous denominations, Wormley said during recent interviews, which included several of the coalition’s leaders.

They see a “spiritual illness,” a “condition of the heart,” said Rippert Roberts Jr., pastor at Grace-Point Fellowship in Spotsylvania.

He highlighted three key societal problems along with a three-pronged solution the coalition believes can lead to positive change.

The problems, Roberts said, are police brutality, systemic racism and social injustice.

The pastor said the coalition seeks to use “tools of the ministry” to fix those problems, in the form of “repentance, reconciliation and restoration.”

That approach follows the coalition’s statement, which opens with a Bible verse: “But let justice roll down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream.”

The coalition statement also focuses on the mass movement, which it says calls for the values espoused in the Declaration of Independence, that “all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.”

Coalition members have said there is a good relationship with Sheriff Roger Harris, who they praised for establishing a strong community-based approach to policing. Harris won't always be the county's sheriff, though, and Wormley said they want that approach to continue beyond his tenure.

Yet the coalition also thinks there may need to be changes to existing policies. They do not support dismantling the police, but instead seek improvements, which will require guidelines that have teeth.

The coalition supports a list of policies the Spotsylvania NAACP sent to the sheriff. The coalition members said they want to determine if the policies are in place, and if not, they want the county to make the changes.

Sheriff's Office spokeswoman Capt. Liz Scott said the sheriff has seen the list and has been communicating with the NAACP. Coalition members said they are waiting to hear back from the sheriff.

The sheriff has publicly supported protesters and denounced police actions that led to death of George Floyd. In a video posted to the office Facebook page, Sheriff Harris said he is committed to “combating race-based policing and violence.”

The sheriff also posted on Facebook in June that his policies cover all eight guidelines sought by the 8cantwait campaign.

That movement seeks specific policies for police: ban chokeholds and shooting at moving vehicles; exhaust all alternatives before shooting; require de-escalation, a

duty to intervene, warnings before shooting and a “use of force continuum.” It also asks that officials report all instances in which force is used.

Some of those demands are included in the Spotsylvania NAACP list, but several key guidelines or changes aren't.

The NAACP list calls for 12 policy actions, including:

- Establish a citizen's review board, “with subpoena power.”
- Eliminate no-knock warrants.
- Review of all fatal police shootings by an outside agency.
- Make records of officer discipline or misconduct publicly available.
- Require a statewide review board to oversee police who use deadly force.
- Review racial profiling guidelines.
- Fully fund community policing programs.

Petway, who has been working with youth in the region for a long time, said the list could “create a better community relationship.” He added that the guidelines likely would lead “police to police themselves,” in a good way.

Accountability by police is a key issue, said Wormley.

“Immunity that exists in policing has to be addressed,” he said, adding that “corrective measures ... need to have teeth.”

Roberts pointed out that the coalition supports good law-enforcement officers in what he said is a challenging time for them as well.

“We need good policemen,” he said.

The pastors said they look forward to working with the sheriff and the Board of Supervisors to find ways to make positive changes.

One effort the group is working on will be a town-hall type gathering primarily as a way for younger people to talk about what is happening. Petway said they should soon have a date set for the meeting.

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Coalition Statement

Statement From The Ministers Coalition of Spotsylvania and Surrounding Counties for Social Change:

Our Declaration Of Unity Against Police Brutality and Racial Injustice

“But let justice roll down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream.” Amos 5:24

This is an incredibly painful period for our community and our country.

At the scene of the first murder in human history, "The LORD said, 'What have you done? Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to Me from the ground.'" (Genesis 4:10) and today the blood of all those beaten and murdered, as a result of Police brutality motivated either by racial prejudice or other reasons, committed by particular law enforcement officers, cries out for justice just as surely-officers who have betrayed the public trust and abused the authority granted to them by those they swore to protect and serve.

Now we, as a coalition of clergy, consecrated to compassionately serve our congregations and our communities as ambassadors for Jesus Christ, we too must cry out. We must cry out with a unified communal voice! We must cry out until justice rolls down as waters! We must cry out until righteousness rolls down as a mighty stream!

We are angry, heart-broken and stand in solidarity with all those protesting non-violently to demand equal justice under the law. We thank God for their sacrifice

and their courageous choice to pursue racial justice through non-violent means in order to save lives and attempt to heal our nation from the disease of racism.

We also stand in support of, and thank God for, the dedicated men and women of law enforcement who bring honor to their badge, have stayed true to their oath, and take seriously the commitment to serve their communities. We recognize that their jobs are difficult, sometimes dangerous, and we are profoundly grateful for their sacrifice.

This monumental movement has been defined by tens of millions of people of conscience, across the racial spectrum, who are insisting that we, as a people and a nation live up to the values as expressed in our nation's timeless declaration that; "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness."

Our Coalition of Clergy must and will use the voices and platforms that God has given us to shine the light of God's love and mercy, to pierce the darkness caused by hate and injustice, to promote peace and healing in this period of pain and suffering and to give a reason for the HOPE that we have within us, humbly, with reverence for Christ and with love for our neighbors.

May this time in our history be a turning point for our nation as we commit ourselves to pursue God's justice, and God's righteousness, for the victims of these terrible acts.

NAACP Police Policy Changes List

- Establish standing Citizen's Review Boards – (Review not Advisory), with subpoena Power. If not, they should identify what accountability structures their municipalities have in place
- Establish a Duty to Intervene Requirement Policy.
- Review of Sheriff Department's Use of Force Continuum and ensure that they have at least 6 Points, with clear rules on escalation.
- Ban the use of Choke Hold & Knee Holds as acceptable in Use of Force Continuums.
- Elimination and ban of "No knock warrants."

- Review of all Fatal Shooting by an Outside Law Enforcement Agency.
- Make available of Sheriff Department's record of disciplining or charging Officers charged with Misconduct.
- Require a Statewide review board for Police officers who use deadly force—this should be tied to re-certification credentials.
- Review Racial Profiling Guidelines and Policies.
- Establish program to "Grow your own Candidate" and "Grow your own Police Officer" pipeline campaigns.
- Call for the full funding of Community Based Policing initiatives.
- Call for the full funding of the DOJ Community Relations Service.