

Dear Unitarian Universalist Ministers, Congregations, and Friends:

At a meeting of clergy sponsored by the new mayor of Shreveport, an African-American minister of a large Baptist church, who I'd met through Interfaith work, reminded me of something.

"Lyn," he said, "I remember James Reeb. I'm from Alabama. I remember that the Unitarians came to Selma. My daddy was an organizer. I remember that the Unitarians came when we needed help."

"Yes, the UUA Board of Trustees adjourned their meeting in Boston when Dr. King sent out the call to come to Selma. Hundreds of our minister went to Selma."

"That's right, and they were just about the only white folks there."

My heart leaps every time I think about that conversation with a prominent minister who was only a boy then. But he remembers that we answered the call and made a point of telling me so.

We have an appalling situation in Jena, LA right now. And we need to support some teenage boys who have been languishing in jail. First charged with attempted murder, one 17-year-old has been convicted of aggravated second-degree battery and conspiracy to commit second-degree battery, and faces a possible sentence of up to 22 years. Mychal Bell's sentencing date is now set for September 20. His five African-American schoolmates have yet to face trial.

I'm asking you to do four things to raise awareness about this case, because the three large Louisiana newspapers have consistently failed to publicize the terrifying racial situation that has been going on for nearly a year.

All Souls Unitarian Universalist Church of Shreveport and the Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge passed resolutions September 9, 2007, pledging to support justice for the "Jena Six" and to take purposeful steps to reduce racial injustice in the Louisiana judicial process.

Background:

After sitting under the "whites only" shade tree at Jena High School, three nooses in school colors appeared on the tree the next day ... and several acts of violence by whites against black students throughout the autumn (for which no one was charged) culminated in six African-American boys beating up a white perpetrator at school. Mychal Bell, now 17, was convicted by an all white jury, with two friends of the white District Attorney on it, at a trial presided over by a white judge. Mychal's public defender attorney, an African American, called no witnesses at the trial. Now is the time to stand up against institutional racism, particularly judicial racism, in front of a white judge who refused to let Mychal's parents attend the trial. Mychal is a member of the football team. His life, and the lives of the other five will be ruined if they have to spend their youth and early adulthood in a Louisiana jail.

1. Look at the BBC2 video at this link:

<http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=4120415818465787991&q=race+hate+in+louisiana&pr=goog-sl>

2. Read at least three articles about the situation:

<http://friendsofjustice.wordpress.com/2007/07/02/ineffective-assistance-of-counsel-what-blane-williams-should-have-known/>

Beating Charges Split La. Town Along Racial Lines by Wade Goodwyn

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=12353776>

http://www.truthout.org/docs_2006/062907M.shtml#1

<http://www.iht.com/articles/ap/2007/06/26/america/NA-GEN-US-Racial-School-Fight.php>

http://commonsense.ourfuture.org/black_high_school_students_louisiana_threatened_lynching?tx=3

Check out and support the <http://www.colorofchange.org> web site and their rally scheduled for September 20th.

4. Sign onto the letter below, and encourage your congregations and interfaith colleagues to write letters expressing your concern and outrage and asking for coverage to:

Shreveportopinion@Gannett.com (up to 250 words) or Letters to Editor, The Times, 222 Lake Street, Shreveport, LA 71101-3738

<http://www.theadvocate.com/help/letters> (form for submitting letters, up to 450 words) or Letters to the Editor, P.O. Box 588, Baton Rouge, LA 70821-0588

Email: letters@timespicayune.com; (250 words) or mail to: Letters to the Editor, The Times-Picayune 3800 Howard Avenue, New Orleans, LA 70125-1429

Sample Letter to the Editor

The judicial process, conviction and potential sentence of over twenty years for a seventeen-year-old African-American high school student in Jena, Louisiana, and the upcoming trials of five additional African-American youths reminds us that equal justice under the law is often only a fantasy in Louisiana. When a black student sat under the “whites only” shade tree at Jena High School, three nooses appeared hanging from the tree the next morning...a hate crime to other African Americans, a “school-boy prank” to local citizens in the predominantly white town of Jena. Where the only barber (white) refuses to cut any Black person’s hair.

After a series of increasingly hostile confrontations, six Black students roughed up a white student last December, and initially were charged with attempted murder, jailed, and several have not been able to post the excessive bonds of \$90,000 to \$130,000. These youths missed half a school year, and languish in jail alongside hardened criminals – which they are not.

Although this case has been publicized in the Chicago Tribune, the Washington Post, the London Observer and by BBC2 News, in Spain, France and China, the Louisiana press has virtually ignored it. This is a disservice to the people of Louisiana, who depend on the press to keep them informed about events and injustice.

This egregious case of racial injustice justice deserves that a responsible and concerned press take an editorial stand against tis kind of instituaional racism in the Louisiana judicial process.

Please sign onto this letter, which we will deliver to the Shreveport Times, the Baton Rouge

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Advocate, and the New Orleans Times-Picayune.

Sample letter from ministers:

We, the undersigned ministers of the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations, respectfully request that you take a stand against the racial injustice in Jena, Louisiana, and that you increase your coverage of this shameful situation. We ask that you inform the citizens of Louisiana about this appalling miscarriage of justice, where an African American boy has been convicted by an all-white jury, prosecuted by a white District Attorney, at a trial presided over by white judge. The convicted boy, Mychal Bell, was defended by an African-American public defender who failed to call any witnesses on the defendant's behalf. Five more youths still face trial.

In the name of justice, we beg your active response to this disgraceful situation.

In faith and hope,

Madeline (Lyn) Oglesby

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