

OPEN LETTER TO CHIEF TODD THOMAS:

FROM : THE REVERENDS KATHLEEN ROLENZ, WAYNE ARNASON, and LEAH HART-
LANDSBERG of the FOX VALLEY UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST FELLOWSHIP

Dear Chief Thomas:

As the spiritual leaders of the only institution in Appleton displaying a “Black Lives Matter” banner, we feel invited to respond to your September 9th post on the Appleton Police Department Facebook page. We must first thank you for your engagement with the issues raised by the Black Lives Matter movement, and for using your leadership role to invite discussion.

There is much in your letter to affirm, such as the admirable list of local police policies and initiatives that many other cities have not yet implemented. Your commitment to “weed out any officer who is taking action on racial or bias-based profiling” is welcome, and we look forward to further reporting on how this is being accomplished. Most powerfully, your statement that “we acknowledge our ugly racist past as a country, and recognize that law enforcement is part of that history” is one we appreciate. Acknowledging this reality is a first and crucial step in understanding how that very racism manifests itself today.

Yet some of your points must be challenged. You dismiss as a “simple narrative” the clear, compelling and overwhelming evidence of racism inherent in the criminal justice system, documented in academic studies such as “The New Jim Crow” by Michelle Alexander. You are correct that police are only one part of a system that historically and still today devalues the lives of those who are not white. We could not agree more that police are not the only players, nor the only ones responsible. Racism within resource allocation decisions and training for service in medical, educational, social, and religious institutions must be urgently addressed as well.

Our majority white congregation proclaims that “Black Lives Matter” because we believe this simple statement to be true, and we reject your characterization of us and our friends and allies across the country as “criminals hiding behind a banner.” You ask that all police forces not be tarred with the same brush of condemnation that we use to deplore illegal police behavior. We ask for that same respect as you invite a deeper conversation about the movement to challenge racism in Appleton and across the country. We do not hang our banner as a gesture of disrespect to fallen officers or their families. Rather, we are informed by our Unitarian Universalist faith, which teaches that each person has inherent worth and dignity and that we are all connected in life with one another.

In Faith,

Rev. Wayne Arnason

Rev. Leah Hart-Landsberg

Rev. Kathleen Rolenz

Fox Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship Ministry Team