
Sign Language: A Visual Analysis of Black Lives Matter Signs of Protest Through Student Discussions

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Using Miroslav Volf's "double vision" perspective from *Exclusion and Embrace*, this study focuses on learning participant perceptions of the Black Lives Matter movement through the signs that protesters carry. By using a three-step methodological approach of surveys, focus groups, and piling, this research reveals the importance of communal participation in research and how participants at a primarily white institution of higher education in the Mid-South reveal contextual themes that are relevant for the church today. The contextual analysis of 50 Black Lives Matter (BLM) photographs by 78 participants indicate that they have an overall positive perception of the BLM movement. Participants also used the visual data as an opportunity to discuss, reflect on, and identify key themes from the protest signs. Study findings suggest that participants valued being a part of the research and the opportunity for contextualization.

Introduction

In recent years a groundswell of protest in America, centered on the broad issues of human rights, culture, and religion, has played out in both traditional media and social media. Photographs and video have served a pivotal role in visually exposing and representing the happenings from these various communities. Rochelle Scheuermann (2017) observed how social media platforms provide a vehicle to communicate, disseminate, and articulate small bits of information that can shape a wider audience. However, this information, albeit in text, picture and/or video form, is often "lacking vital facts" (xvii) about the context. The viewer needs to better understand what is occurring on a macro level.

Recent protests for human rights in the spring of 2017 revived the memory and significance of the summer of 2014 when the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement took form. In both cases, information was presented in text, picture, and video form using social media outlets. These protests, and the information presented via social media, reveal opportunities for communication scholars and the Christian community to ask important questions, and for the church to develop appropriate responses to the needs of the local communities it serves (Matthew 25:35-26).¹ If the

church is the hands and feet of Jesus (Tait 2010) it must also seek to understand the heart of the people who are crying out for justice and peace. In order to better understand how the church can address the needs of local communities, particularly in relation to recent protests for human rights, this article examines the historical context of BLM, and the responses students have about the BLM movement through analyzing and interpreting photographs of the movement documented via social media.

The Explosion of the Black Lives Matter Movement

The smell of gasoline fumes from a destroyed Conoco gas station (Figure 1), melted rubber from dozens of burned cars, and charred wood from the buildings that were burned and looted filled the crisp fall air. Anyone visiting Ferguson, Missouri on November 25, 2014 would have witnessed the same environment that I as a researcher did. In spite of pleas from elected officials and the mobilization of the Missouri National Guard, protesters took to the streets of Ferguson (a suburb about 10 miles from St. Louis city center) and cities across the United States to express their disapproval of prosecutor Robert McCulloch's announcement. The St. Louis County grand jury had

¹ All Biblical references are in the New International Version© unless noted otherwise.

voted not to bring criminal charges against white police officer Darren Wilson. Wilson fatally shot Michael Brown, an unarmed African-American teenager (Davey and Bosman 2014).



Figure 1: The remnants of a burned Conoco Phillips gas station in Ferguson, Missouri, November 25, 2014. Photo by Gabriel B. Tait©

Scholars Moody-Ramirez, Tait, Smith, Fears, and Randle (2016) observe how social media became one of the platforms for many of the protesters to express their feelings. Some of the protesters carried cameras, some guns, but the majority carried their signs. They desired to be seen and heard. For them, the shooting death of Brown, and the resulting lack of charges for the Ferguson police officer, provided another example of the injustices America offers minorities. As the protesters marched over nine-months, the signs they carried covered a multitude of social and civil rights issues.

During the height of the BLM movement, and in recent protests regarding human rights and immigration reform, images of protesters suggest that people are united in their quest to advocate for human rights and basic human dignities. However, while there is sometimes unity on other matters, when African Americans cry out, “Black Lives Matter!” all too often other Americans scream back, “All Lives Matter,” with the unspoken subtext “except for Blacks” (Sandra 2016, Cullors, Tometi and Garza 2017)! There is a tension with regard to the premise that Black lives have been devalued in America’s history and continue to be devalued in the present. As an established moral authority, the American church is at a contemporary crossroad. How is the church supposed to respond to these social protests? Are the youth a conduit for change? What insights can be gained through the analysis of protest images on social media?

This article offers an interdisciplinary perspective to visual communication and mission studies by exploring the meaning behind the BLM protest signs and the interpretation and significance of that meaning to the church and society. This research does not examine the

people who created the signs but seeks to understand how people without direct affiliation with the BLM movement interpret and make sense of the protest signs depicted. It examines the perceptions and worldview (Hiebert 2008) students have about race, culture and visual communication methods. It also gives consideration to Jonathan Bonk’s (2002) observation that photographic and visual images can be shapers of “what is” and what can be the possibilities for people’s perceptions of society (1).

Black Lives Matter as a Black Theological Expression

In the biblical Gospels, the writers (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John) share parables and narratives of Jesus seeking to reclaim the “lost” (Matt.18: 12-14; Luke 15; Mark 2:17; John 10). These biblical points speak to a universality of God’s mission in lifting up Jesus (John 12:32). Jesus came in the form of humanity for the distinct purpose of reclaiming and redeeming, liberating and reconciling (John 1; John 3:16). Despite the inclusive and evangelistic message of the New Testament, the various ecclesiastical communities within Christianity have often excluded slaves, blacks, women, the poor, etc. This division has played out many times for the African American. The Black Lives Matter movement provides one example in which many African Americans believe their experiences and outcry, however important in the African American context, have been pushed aside, miscategorized, and not appreciated by whites and others as a cry for assistance and partnership.

James Cone and others (Cone 1970, Roberts 2005, Wilmore and Cone 1979) developed a black liberation theology during the late 1960s to address this divide in American ecclesiological circles. Cone argues that in order to understand Black Liberation Theology one must understand Christian theology. For Cone (1970):

Christian theology is a theology of liberation. It is a rational study of the being of God in the world in light of the existential situation of an oppressed community, relating the forces of liberation to the essence of the gospel, which is Jesus Christ. (17)

Cone’s theological movement argued that the black experience of oppression (vis-à-vis slavery, Jim Crow laws, and systemic segregation through cultural constructs) has shaped black cultural awareness and thought. Additionally, black liberation theology focused on addressing African-Americans’ existential needs and their religious experiences, as they aimed to reach others with the Christian gospel. In responding to these concerns systematically and theologically, it forced the larger society (including the church) to acknowledge the

economic, social, racial and cultural disparities in their midst.

Civil Rights and the Black Lives Matter Movement

#BlackLivesMatter as a Social Movement

The BLM movement differs from other African American social movements in recent history. For example, in the 1950s and '60s, the African American church served as a pillar of hope and an organizing force aimed at combatting "racial and economic injustices" (Honey 2007) in its quest for civil rights. #BlackLivesMatter emerged, not out of the church, but out of social media. Founders Aliza Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi created the movement as a response to the 2012 shooting death of 17-year old African-American, Trayvon Martin, and the subsequent 2013 acquittal of shooter George Zimmerman. Realizing the social, economic, and racial injustices, Garza, Cullors, and Tometi adopted the platform that:

#BlackLivesMatter is working for a world where Black lives are no longer systematically and intentionally targeted for demise. We affirm our contributions to this society, our humanity, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression. We have put our sweat equity and love for Black people into creating a political project—taking the hashtag off of social media and into the streets. The call for Black lives to matter is a rallying cry for ALL Black lives striving for liberation. (Cullors, Tometi and Garza 2017)

Julius Bailey and David J. Leonard (2015) contend, "Black Lives Matter attempts to deprive white supremacy of the oxygen it needs to sustain these assumptions and the state violence they engender" (69). David Emmanuel Goatley (2016) offers a Biblical perspective on the movement asserting, "Justice is the key issue that the Black Lives Matter movement seeks." He continues, "The idea of justice for those who live with social marginalization leans heavily on the idea of having enough (James 2:15-16). It is a concept born from the biblical tradition that recognizes God as being just" (pers. com.) (2016) (Isaiah 1:17). As a social action, the BLM movement concentrates on bringing awareness to the plight of blacks globally.

During the civil rights movement, the church was foundational to issues surrounding justice and equality. In *Letter From A Birmingham Jail* (King Jr. 1963), the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. examined the dilemma of African Americans from the confines of an Alabama jail cell. Written to a group of clergymen, his reflection

revealed how protests provided vehicles for change. As a leader of mass protest, King argued it was his missional calling to speak out against injustice and proclaim the gospel of freedom beyond his hometown (85). Protests were not merely an act of civil disobedience, but a call for equality. Civil rights protesters of the 1960s confronted many of the same life-or-death issues for the African-American communities that are represented in more recent protests.

Laurie Green (2007), in her study of the 1968 Memphis sanitation workers' strike that set the unfortunate stage for the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., notes that protest signs were a primary mode of communicating the issues. Signs presented visual representations of protesters' desire for their children to be free from the oppressive structures in postwar Memphis and the American south (238). Throughout the years, signs and chants of protesters provided primary modes of communication for those seeking to make their voices heard during perceived injustices.

Unlike church models of the past, where public protest demonstrations and non-violent means were primary methods of expressing displeasure with social issues, BLM speaks the language of its supporters. The BLM movement looks at technology and information dissemination as primary tools to mobilize their supporters. BLM is not directly birthed out of the church. Thus, it is not constrained to some of the social, political, and communicative structures of the church. Recently, tens-of-thousands of willing protesters took to the streets with the swipe of a smart phone. Since July 2014, Alisa Robinson (2016) has tallied "at least 1,891 Black Lives Matter demonstrations in the last 931 days" on her website. To increase its effectiveness in the 21st century, the church must refer back to Paul's 1st century admonition (1 Corinthians 9:20-23) to organically adapt cultural methods for the sake of the Christian gospel. The church must find ways to better understand and holistically address the needs outlined and represented by today's protesters marching for justice.

Civil Rights Protest and Signs Against Otherness

In the 1950s and '60s, Memphis, Tennessee-based photographer Ernest Withers captured African American culture. His pictures showed some of the best and worst circumstances of the African American experience in the South. One photo shot in 1967 brings out the importance of this study. The picture entitled, "Still Marching," features what looks like African American college students carrying protest signs. One of the signs reads, "Jamerson was 1st will I be 2nd or 3rd." While the context of the sign has been muted by history, one may infer the sign had something to do with police violence. This sign is understood more clearly

when placed and examined in the same context of the other signs. One protester holds a sign that reads, “PLEASE PROTECT US FROM OUR PROTECTOR!” Contemporarily, during a recent BLM rally and protest in front of the White House in Washington, D.C., protesters held signs with similar messages to those in the 1950s and 60s. They read, “JUSTICE & EQUITY FOR BLACK PEOPLE IS THAT TOO MUCH TO ASK?” or “WHEN DO WE AS CIVILIANS GET TO DEFEND OUR LIVES? #blacklivesmatter” [sic]. These bands of protesters, both in the 1960s and contemporaneously, were armed with signs fighting for their voices to be heard. Laurie Green offers a context to protest signs in the South during the civil rights era, noting,

Protest signs while focusing on the issues at hand did not ignore the underlying lack of civil rights of the era. Many women marching in Memphis for welfare rights in 1968 carried signs that had one simple request: proper childcare centers. The protest signs carried stated women could not work, and thus achieve the American dream without help from the system that was created to assist them. Their signs seemed to be created to simply state, “Help us to help ourselves!” (Green 2007, 273)

Often signs held by protesters illuminate systemic issues of injustice. Michael Honey (2007) offers further context to the use of protest signs in the famed “I AM A MAN!” campaign in Memphis. He writes,

Protest signs that simply focused on the humanity of the protesters were produced. The “I am a man” slogan was used to simply focus the viewer on the basic human right of being seen as a person. As activist James Lawson stated in a February 24th press conference, “For at the heart of racism is the idea that a man is not a man, that a person is not a person.” (211)

The recent use and message of signs in protest implies that the struggles and fears African Americans navigated in the 1960s are very similar to the struggles and fears they have presently. In order for progress to be made, we must analyze our viewing of “the other”.

Edward Said (1979) expanded on the theory of otherness in *Orientalism*. While this concept was not new, Said’s observations raised a modern awareness of dominant communities’ propensities to view “peoples, languages, experiences, and cultures” (xviii) as “other.” Miraslov Volf (1996) offers a more comprehensive look at otherness, post-Said. He asserts that “otherness” in its worst form draws negatively on distinguishing how

people and communities are different. For him, this approach to humanity creates a gulf in learning about the other. Volf argues that we need to “*place the problem of otherness at the center of theological reflection on social realities*”² (17). In doing this, humanity has “double vision” as a way to understand other cultures and potentially prevent cultural misunderstanding. Fortunately, Ecclesiastes 1:9 reminds us there is nothing new under the sun. So, we must ask, how can we seek to understand those that we deem the other?

Pachauau (2007) notes, “Taking our cue from Volf’s ‘double vision,’ we propose that the way we perceive the other holds the key for developing a healthy communal relationship” (24). He adds, double vision urges both viewing a culture “from here” and then viewing the same culture “from there” to prevent domestication of the otherness of the other (12).

Volf uses the following photographic metaphor as a way to “embrace” the other, suggesting, “An embrace always involves a double movement of aperture and closure” (Volf 1996, 247). Similarly, the process of adjusting the camera lens to allow more or less light into a camera serves as a way to properly expose a photograph, documenting the moment. Volf challenges participants in the following,

Seeing ‘from here’ comes naturally. That is how we normally see, from our own perspective, guided by our own values and interests that are shaped by the overlapping cultures and traditions we inhabit. But what does it take to see ‘from there,’ from the perspective of others? (251)

I believe that by students viewing and discussing the BLM signs of protest, they may become more proficient at seeing “from there” and come away with a more informed perspective about the movement. Volf’s question serves as a useful lens to view and process the BLM movement.

Research and Methods

The purpose of the research for this article is to examine how people without direct affiliation with the BLM movement interpret and make sense of the protest signs they see during a protest. Specifically, the research wants to understand the perceptions and worldviews students have about race, culture, religion and this social movement. This study addresses the role the church may play in visually supporting and contextualizing the concerns of protesters. Therefore, the following questions are posed:

² Italics were in the original quote.

R1: What are the perceptions participants have before viewing protest signs?

R2: What are the dominant themes participants identify in the Black Lives Matter signs of protest?

R3: What, if any, role is evident between the church and protesters in the Black Lives Matter movement images?

Participatory Photography as a Method

Over the last decade there has been a rise in so-called Participatory Photography Research (PPR) and Participatory Action Research (PAR)³ methods. PAR is an innovative qualitative research method where members of a given community unite with a researcher to study and bring about change in ways that are mutually beneficial for all involved. These models focus a great deal on local knowledge (Willigen 2002, Geertz 1983)—that is, input from the community is gained on a grassroots level. John van Willigen notes, “The core idea of AR is that research will be more valid and there is a greater likelihood of it being used by a community where the community has meaningful participation in the research process” (Argyris and Schon 1991, 86). The greater the participation from the community, the more useful it will be, is the common assumption that guides this model. Theologically, James 1:22 reminds believers they are not to merely be hearers of the word, but doers as well. This approach is fitting for AR/PAR models.

The more communal approach of AR/PAR provides a welcoming and useful tool for understanding local contexts and meanings. PAR serves as a means of empowering participants who traditionally have not had a voice. Bruce Berg (2007) notes PAR as a methodological foundation is of particular importance to the BLM study. PAR allows the researcher and participants to go deeper in their understandings of protest signs, drawing out the “collective self-reflective inquiry taken by participants in social relationship with one another” (223). In Paulo Freire’s (2006) study of the oppressed in Brazil he suggests, “through action the culture of domination is culturally confronted” (54). Freire’s emphasis on one’s action highlights that how participants actively engaged in community can give life to the possibilities of change.

While this study does not use the actual photographs taken by BLM protesters, it does embrace the participatory model that communities can and should

talk about the images they are consuming. This dialogue provides a hermeneutical space to discuss potentially challenging visual situations on a local level.

As seen with photographic participatory methods, visual research methods present unique opportunities to address cultural and missiological issues in diverse contexts. Elizabeth Edwards (1997) suggests that “photography as a medium is not about photography *per se* but about its potential to question, arouse curiosity, tell in different voices or see through different eyes” (54). This study focuses on learning student perceptions of the BLM movement through their response to the signs that protesters carry.

Method

This study employed a three-step methodological approach for collecting data and analyzing student perceptions of the BLM movement and the church. A convenience sample of 500 Google images was searched using the key terms “Black Lives Matter,” “Church,” “Protest,” and “Signs.” Each image was given an individual number from 1-500. A random sample of 50 images was selected using Random Integers.org. The 50 images were divided into two sets of 25.

A convenience sample of students enrolled in a primarily white institution of higher education in the Mid-South of the United States was offered the opportunity to participate in the study; all the students who participated volunteered for the research. To allow for honest responses on hot button topics like the racial, cultural, and/or religious perceptions of the Black Lives Matter movement, my graduate assistant facilitated anonymous surveys and group discussions. This step was taken so that student conversations could proceed without concern for how a professor may or may not feel about the given research topic.

For those that chose to participate, consent was obtained, and they were asked to complete an anonymous online survey. The survey sought to learn student’s true perceptions of the Black Lives Matter movement and to gather general demographic information. The survey asked: 1) Have you heard of Black Lives Matter? 2) What is your perception of Black Lives Matter? 3) What year are you in college? 4) What photographic experience do you have? 5) What is your religious affiliation, if any? 6) What is your racial / ethnic / cultural affiliation?, and 7) gender. The perceptual and demographic data was then tabulated.

3. A wide variation occurs in how the term, “action research” is applied. There are a number of names given to Participatory Action Research (PAR) methods (McIntyre 2008, 2003): participant action research (PAR) (Pavkov, Priest and Kathleen 2012, Wadsworth 1997), action research (AR) (Hearn, Tacchi and Foth 2009), cultural action (CA) (Freire 1970), collaborative action research (CAR) (Schensul and Schensul 1992), community based participatory research (CBPR) (Wang and Burris, 1997, Wang, 2002), participatory photography (PP) (Hubbard 2009). The discipline of education often uses the term “action research.” Other disciplines like visual anthropology (Banks 1996; Pink 2007; Strong and Wilder 2009) use the term collaboration research. They are all terms for generally the same type of participatory research that involves others.

This data aided me in establishing a baseline of understanding in how participants made sense of the Black Lives Matter movement, protest signs, and the universal church. The survey data also allowed the researcher to measure the religious, racial/ethnic-cultural affiliation, and photographic experience of the participants. As noted, the participating students were from a primarily white institution of higher education in the Mid-South. I was interested in how participants with a limited understanding of the movement visually read the protest signs.

Participants

A total of 78 students participated in this study. The racial, ethnic, and cultural demographics for participants were varied along racial lines with 30% (23) African-American/Blacks and 56% (44) White/Caucasian. In addition, 3% (2) identified themselves as Arabic, 5% (4) Asian, 1% (1) Biracial, and 1% (1) as other. Four percent (3) of the participants either checked “none” or left the question unanswered.

A total of 62 students or 79.5% percent selected their gender. Of the responding participants 39% (24) were male and 61% (38) were female. A total of 57 (73%) participants self-identified as Christian. Within the Christian self-identification there were a myriad of categories, including, but not limited to, Catholic, Methodist, Baptist, and Assemblies of God. Of the total participants 5% (4) of the participants were Muslim, 4% (3) Agnostic, 3% (2) Hindu, 2% (1) Buddhist, 1% Atheist, 3% (2) other, and 9% (7) noted no religious affiliation. Participants that identified as “other” noted that they were “spiritual,” but had no specific religious affiliation.

The educational background of participants varied with 27% (21) in graduate school, 15% (12) as undergraduate seniors, 30% (23) juniors, 23% (18) sophomores, and 5% (4) freshmen. Since participants were analyzing photographs, the researcher wanted to know their photographic experience. A total of 37% (29) of participants classified themselves as amateur, 22% (17) as student, 17% (13) as hobbyist, 6% (5) as professional, and 18% (14) with no photographic experience. Hubbard (2009) notes participatory analysis in visual communication gives people “the tools” of having “their voices heard” in research (21). Because participants had significant amounts of photographic experience, this research methodology was appropriate to foster conversations and visual analysis of the signs they saw.

Focus Groups

After completion of the online surveys, students were asked to count from one to six to develop a

consistent group size. I wanted diverse groups, e.g. male, female, cultural, racial, ethnic, and age, but did not want to bias the groups by intentionally placing participants together. Participants then assembled themselves into the groups corresponding with their number. There were generally five to six participants in each group. Each group was provided two BLM code sheets for the two sets of images they would review. Each group selected one person to serve as a recorder who wrote their group’s number and the set number of photographs they received of the BLM protest signs. Each group also included the time and location of their meeting with the researcher. The facilitator further explained to each group’s recorder that as their particular group talked about the photographs, they were to write: 1) general notes and observations about their group’s interaction with the visual images, 2) the number of the particular photograph they were discussing, 3) the final themes determined by their group, 4) the meaning or theme of each photographic pile, and 5) a description of the pile and how the group came to their conclusion. The group recorder was also trained to facilitate their individual group discussions.

Pile Sorting as Application

The Q-Sort or piling process is the third part of this BLM data collection method. The piling method (Spradley 1979) was used to identify patterns among individuals and draw out cultural narratives and themes through the protest signs. Historically, McCurdy, Spradley and Shandy (2005) observe piling has been used in various research participatory methodologies and ethnographies (Spradley 2000) to understand how individuals and groups assign meanings in their context. Recently, the piling method was used in understanding how Liberians make sense of their culture through the photographs they produced for the “Sight Beyond My Sight” (SBMS) study (Tait 2013).

In the BLM study, each group was given a set of images turned face down. They were then given instructions to follow a five-step process before piling their images. The following instructions were given to the groups: 1) each participant was to view each image and then pass the image to the person to their right, 2) all participants were to wait till everyone had viewed each image before anyone could begin the discussion, 3) after each participant viewed all 25 images, the group recorder would lay the image on the floor or table, 4) after each image was placed the group collectively discussed the images, and 5) no student was allowed to use any social media to research the images. After the group followed the previous steps, individual members selected photographs and placed them into piles of similar themes. There were no stipulations on the categories, but all participants had to agree which

images were placed in their respective groups. Participants were advised that each person had to offer input before an image could be placed in a specific category. Groups were given 20 minutes to discuss, select, and pile their images. At the 3-minute mark, the facilitator reminded each group that they had to give their photo themes and image numbers to their group recorder. I noticed the majority of the groups spent most of their time discussing the meaning, context, and purpose of the images.

Findings

Research Question 1 sought to understand participants' perceptions and worldviews of the BLM movement before viewing protest signs. Figure 2 shows that of 74 respondents, nearly half of participants 47.3% (35), had positive perceptions of the BLM movement, while 32.4% (24) had negative perceptions, and 20.3% (15) had neutral perceptions. Research Question 2 sought to observe the dominant themes participants identified in the Black Lives Matter signs of protest. The 78 participants identified 177 qualitative pile themes from the two sets of 25 photographs. The data presented four overarching themes: 1) Religion & Culture; 2) Unification and Change; 3) Communication of the Message, and 4) Opposition Against BLM.

A subset of the *Religion & Culture* theme revealed topics such as "church involvement with BLM," "religious symbols," "church signs," and "irresponsibility of institutions."

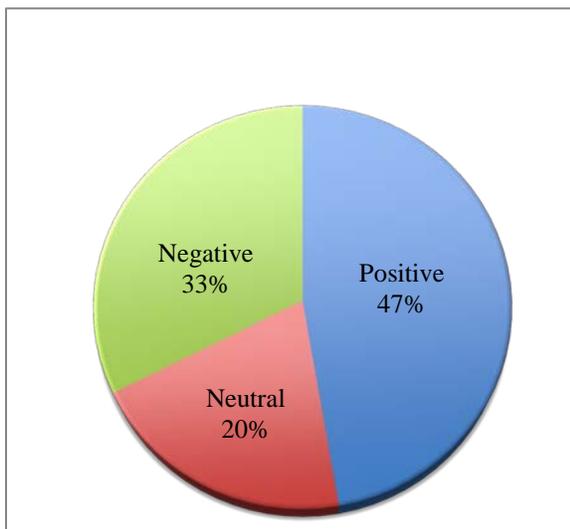


Figure 2: The perceptions and worldviews of study participants about the BLM movement before viewing protest signs.

Perceptions of Black Lives Matter

Research Question 3 sought to learn what, if any, role is evident between the church and protesters in the Black Lives Matter movement images. Based on the photographs, qualitative responses, and the group discussions, significant evidence supports areas of cooperation between the church and BLM protesters. Participants identified Religion & Culture and Unification & Change as their top two themes. In the qualitative responses, participants observed how the church appeared to support or hinder the BLM movement.

Discussion and Missiological Implications

Following is a discussion about a few of those themes learned from the participants' group discussions of the BLM protest signs. In addition, study limitations and opportunities for future research are suggested. This study examined how 78 students with no direct connection to the BLM movement made sense of the protest signs they examined. While participants' direct exposure to the BLM movement was limited to various media channels (e.g. television broadcast and print newspapers) participants expressed how social media offered the primary channel in which they understood the movement.

In research question 1, I learned that nearly half of participants' overall perceptions of the BLM movement were positive (47.3%), with roughly a third negative, and the remainder neutral. This was an unexpected finding considering the divisive rhetoric that has been recently heard. Many of the participants are from small towns and have been influenced by the negative rhetoric. One participant, a white Christian female wrote,

I don't know how to feel about Black Lives Matter. Having the friends I do, my heart breaks because they are treated unfairly because of the color of their skin. The media bends and twist the facts of what the BLM actually started out to do. It wasn't to promote hate, but to share love. I still don't understand why someone hates based on the color of their skin. I have honestly shed tears because my friend has different fears for her children that I will have for mine, as they grow older.

Another participant, an African American Christian male wrote about the BLM movement,

I feel that it (BLM) is extremely necessary in today's society because of the injustices and crimes made against people of color in the United States. Heartbreaking stories such as Trayvon Martin, Alton Sterling, and Sandra Bland are only a few of the



Figure 4: BLM banners hanging outside of the Ecumenical Campus Ministries building in Lawrence, Kansas. The banners feature the names of nine churches and one Islamic center equally.

Participants expressed how the two signs in one picture was a thoughtful act of ecumenical unity. For the participants, unity is represented with the coming together of different people, organizations, and causes for the greater good. Interestingly, there were no people present in the photograph that participants said was an example of unity. The participants read in the unity theme by what was printed.

This affirmation of unity parallels Paul's writings not to conform to the patterns of this world. Such nonconformity reveals God's presence through the signs, symbols, communication, and interaction we have daily. This interaction may occur between people, spirits, animals, nature, music, technology, and images (e.g. banners, paintings, or photographs). God employs these tools to show himself and his message to humanity (Psalm 19:1-6 Isaiah 1:18; Romans 1:20; John 7; John 1:1-17, et al.). God uses an abundance of tools at his disposal to reveal himself to us and to encourage unity between us. The Psalmist affirms this, positing, "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it" (Psalm 24: 1).

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

As with any study, there were limitations for this study. One limitation is that the research team concentrated solely on images using "Black Lives Matter," "Church," "Protest," and "Signs" as key words collected via a Google images search. The research team did not examine the Twitter or other social media platforms. Further research on this topic or similar ones should consider examinations of social media campaigns on Twitter and Instagram. These social media platforms are considered more responsive to "real people" in the social world.

A second limitation of this study is that it was focused on learning how a relatively small group of participants (78) understood a movement that they were not directly involved with. Future studies will want to include a larger group of participants from different geographical locations and ecclesiological backgrounds.

Conclusion

The Black Lives Matter movement provides a ripe opportunity for the church to engage the existential needs of communities protesting for their rights. Unfortunately, engagement has happened on a limited basis, given the negative perceptions many long-term non-African American churchgoers have. BLM insists justice—i.e. fairness—be equitable irrespective of race. This is consistent with the life and witness of Jesus. Given that evangelicals profess Jesus as Savior and Lord, it would seem evangelicals would be partners in and advocates for the BLM movement. This, however, does not appear to be the case. It appears many white evangelicals are not offended (Simon 2016) by the number of African-Americans who are being murdered by law enforcement with no accountability for excessive violence that results in fatalities. Would those white evangelicals have the same posture if African American law enforcement officers were murdering unarmed white citizens?

Where one stands determines what one sees; this is Volff's point in *Exclusion and Embrace*. The BLM movement does not assert White Lives Do Not Matter. However, many white evangelicals hold to the latter as a matter of normativity. Shouldn't people who claim to follow Jesus believe that it is normative that Black lives matter and that anyone who takes a Black life should be held accountable? Shouldn't evangelicals stand for justice—in the sense of equitable distribution—so that all are treated fairly? People should be treated fairly with provision as well as punishment.

As this study demonstrates, many college students hold a positive perspective about the BLM movement. They are willing to engage and bring change to hurting communities. Perhaps this study reveals an opportunity for the church to join the movement, as it has done in the past, and help hurting people as they seek justice. This is the rallying call for the gospel! When I was tired, you met me there! When I was without food, you met me there! When I was hungry, you also met me there! When will the church shed its divisive inhibition and embrace the rallying calls: No Justice, No Peace! Fight the Power! Black Lives Matter! Black Lives Matter!

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