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Unrest leads to joint statement, ecumenical gathering in New Albany

With masks and social distancing in mind, a Sept. 19 ecumenical prayer service in New Albany is held behind the Town Clock Church on Main Street. (Submitted photo)



By Ray Day (Special to *The Criterion*)

NEW ALBANY—"As the Church, we have a responsibility to reclaim the witness that no person should be treated as lesser or other, and that the lessons of the past should be remembered and repented so as not to be repeated.

"Therefore, we believe that all persons were created in God's image, according to God's likeness, and should be treated with divine reverence and affection. We believe that in Christ there are no distinctions, for all are children of God, and as such all are part of one family."

Those words serve as part of a "Statement of Unity" recently issued by several churches in New Albany in response to ongoing civil unrest across the United States.

As a result, leaders of those churches—including members of three Catholic parishes—gathered for an ecumenical prayer service on Sept. 19 in New Albany. The event was an answer to a series of questions raised by the board of directors of the city's Cardinal Ritter Birthplace Foundation, Inc. (CRBFI) at its May meeting.

Cardinal Joseph E. Ritter, who served as archbishop of Indianapolis from 1933-46 before later becoming a cardinal in the Archdiocese of St. Louis, has long been praised for integrating the Catholic schools throughout the archdiocese. He did the same when he became archbishop of St. Louis in 1947.

Many questions arose during the CRBFI's May discussion: What should be done to show support for those encountering social injustice in America? What would Cardinal Ritter do if he were still alive today? How would his legacy be reflected now, nearly 75 years after his transformative actions?

"Work hard. Pray hard. Don't worry." With Cardinal Ritter's often-quoted words in mind, CRBFI's founding chairperson David Hock did just that. The member of St. Mary-of-the-Knobs Parish in Floyd County envisioned a prayer service in partnership with neighboring St. John Presbyterian Church across the street from the Cardinal Ritter House. Immediately, the church's pastor, Rev. Allen Colwell, was on board.

Because of the well-documented history of the Underground Railroad in New Albany, Hock and the Rev. Colwell contacted Rev. LeRoy Marshall of the Town Clock Church, a

major “station” on the way to freedom for decades of southern Blacks in the mid-19th century.

Ideas flowed and actions were taken. Soon, a “Statement of Unity” was drafted, tweaked and approved by the expanding committee. Current CRBFI board chairman Fred Ernstberger, a member of Holy Family Parish in New Albany, and incoming board member retired Father Stephen Banet were also hard at work on the project.

Father Joseph Feltz, pastor of Our Lady of Perpetual Help Parish in New Albany and dean of the New Albany Deanery, was among the clergy who worked on editing the initial draft of the statement.

“I was pleased the statement was biblically based. It expressed the Christian worldview that all people are created in God’s image and should be treated with divine reverence and affection,”

Father Feltz said. “I also was proud that Christian ministers were willing to stand together to witness human dignity.”

During the 30-minute prayer service held on the plaza behind the Town Clock Church, 11 ministers and priests representing some of the 20-plus local New Albany churches led approximately 125 attendees in prayer, song, a litany, reflection and benediction. The New Albany Deanery was represented by Father Feltz, Father Jeremy Gries, pastor of Holy Family Church in New Albany, and Conventual Franciscan Father Mark Weaver, pastor of St. Mary Parish in New Albany.

“The setting at the foot of the Town Clock Church was entirely appropriate for people of faith praying for unity in our community,” said Ernstberger.

Hock described the prayerful presence of those gathered as “a special evening. I believe in addition to the clergy and attendees, the Holy Spirit may have been with us.”

Indeed, some in attendance believed it was the presence of the Holy Spirit when, at the very moment the service ended—7 p.m.—the bells in the Clock Tower Church unexpectedly pealed forth as if in celebration of unity among all those present.

Of the 30-minute service, Hock added, “I was especially pleased with the new connections among the faiths that I witnessed. I felt a very important ecumenical spirit!”

And that spirit led to this message highlighted in the “Statement of Unity:” “Therefore, we denounce racism in all its forms and choose to strive to be a witness to our community, especially our young people, that diversity is a cause for celebration not conflict, a display of beauty not ugliness, a show of strength not weakness.”

Father Feltz said he hoped that the community would come to “understand that the battle against the sin of racism is a duty of a follower of Jesus Christ.

“I hope they also realize that this important work is something that the New Albany Christian churches can work on together. Finally, I hope they realize that when we rely on God, all things are possible.”

(Ray Day is a member of Our Lady of Perpetual Help Parish in New Albany and is secretary of the Cardinal Ritter Birthplace Foundation. Criterion editor Mike Krokos contributed to this story.) †