

A petition for prayer, unity — and justice

By Rabbi David Lyon, Bishop Andrew Doyle and the Rev. John Ogletree



Godofredo A. Vásquez /Staff photographer

Houston Police Chief Art Acevedo talks to motorcyclists at the ride for justice honoring George Floyd on Sunday at Emancipation Park.

We the leaders of congregations and other institutions from across the South Texas region which represent the racial, religious and economic diversity of the area call for our elected leaders to hold a Justice Summit. Last week, Mayor Sylvester Turner took a first step with an executive order but much more must be done.

On the day George Floyd was laid to rest, Turner signed an executive order regarding police use of force. The order requires officers to de-escalate, give a verbal warning and exhaust all

other options before using deadly force; mandates that they intercede when they witness misconduct; forbids chokeholds and firing at moving vehicles; and requires reporting all use of force to the Independent Police Oversight Board. While some of these were already policies of the Houston Police Department, Turner promised that “this is not the end” and Police Chief Art Acevedo observed that “this is a watershed moment.”

We also believe that the killing of Floyd is a watershed moment in Houston and

this country because of the nationwide response of anger and cries for justice. We encourage protests in Houston to continue to be constructive and peaceful to honor the family of Floyd.

We call on U.S. congressional representatives, state legislators, and county and city governmental representatives to join in a Justice Summit along with community and religious leaders to plan a strategy for justice to rule the land. This summit must be fully represented by every race, creed and color, every political persuasion and economic background. The goal of this summit will be to go beyond use of force policies in order to reduce injustice resulting from police misconduct.

The Metropolitan Organization calls for the following areas to be addressed:

1. Changing the present culture within police departments from a culture of intimidation and punitive responses to one of community policing which focuses on developing relationships within the community.
2. Raising the hiring standards of police to increase the degree of professionalism.
3. Effective and rapid implementation by the Texas Commission on Law Enforcement of their recent decision to require all Texas police officers to learn how implicit bias can affect their actions.
4. Require the introduction of programs in all police departments to provide for the ongoing mental health wellness and care for the mental health needs of officers.
5. The elimination of qualified immunity that shields law enforcement officers from being sued for their discretionary actions.
6. The establishment of Independent Police Auditors with subpoena power in municipalities to independently investigate allegations of police misconduct.
7. Timely and effective investigation of all police shootings, allegations of excessive force and in-custody deaths by the Harris County District Attorney Civil Rights Division and prosecution of all officers where it is warranted.

The use of force policies Turner ordered must be immediately and broadly

reflected in the day-to-day actions of our HPD officers if they are to be a credible beginning. The undersigned, and faith leaders from the Unitarian Universalist Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, Presyterian Church USA and others believe that we must adopt more far-reaching approaches, like the ones we mention above, if we are to fundamentally change and improve the relationship between our police officers and the communities they seek to serve and protect.

Lyon is a rabbi with Congregation Beth Israel. Doyle is bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Texas. Ogletree is a minister at First Metropolitan Church. This op-ed represents the views of many more faith leaders involved with The Metropolitan Organization: Bishop Michael Rinehart, Texas-Louisiana Gulf Coast Synod, ELCA; the Rev. Charles Turner, New Pleasant Grove Baptist Church, TMO; Rabbi David Segal, Texas Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism; the Rev. Lynn Hargrove, General Presbyter, Presbytery of New Covenant; the Rev. Dr. Colin Bossen, PhD, First Unitarian Universalist Church of Houston.

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