

Racists interrupt online meeting organized by Ottawa's interfaith council

An effort in the nation's capital to rally faith and community leaders in solidarity against anti-Black racism also served as a lesson about racist views held by some in society for a brief yet disturbing moment.

As Rev. Jim Pot of the Knox Presbyterian Church in Ottawa started to speak during a June 9 online Zoom meeting organized by Ottawa's Capital Region Interfaith Council, he was interrupted for about a minute by hackers making racist comments targeting black and Jewish people.

"This is why we are here tonight," Pot said after he was able to start speaking again during the online meeting that was called "to express our outrage at the brutal murder of George Floyd and our unswerving solidarity and unity in heart with our Black community."

The video of the killing of George Floyd, a black man, by a white police officer in the United States who knelt on Floyd's neck for almost nine minutes, has sparked a global outpouring of anti-racism protests, including thousands of people marching in Ottawa on June 5 that included Prime Minister Justin Trudeau kneeling in solidarity with the protesters.

The online meeting, which was hosted by Rabbi Reuven Bulka, featured a keynote address by Rev. Dr. Anthony Bailey of Parkdale United Church, statements from other religious and civic leaders, including Ottawa-Cornwall Archbishop Terrence Prendergast, Ottawa Deputy Mayor Laura Dudas and Police Chief Peter Sloly.

Bulka called on all of those involved to work together to eliminate anti-Black and systemic racism against all people of colour.

"It is an absolutely essential cause," Bulka said. "You attack one part of our community, you attack all of our community. We must denounce and reject all racism in all of its forms."

Archbishop Prendergast pledged the Catholic Church in Ottawa's support to the Black community and all those working for social justice, adding that "we have a long way to go" and that people have to change not only how they act externally but also internally by "looking into our hearts."

"If we work together with all other faiths and people of goodwill in Ottawa, I

think we can go forward” in making positive change, Prendergast said.

Bailey, who is black, said racism has a long history in Canada that Canadians often do not acknowledge in our national mythology of being a shining light of tolerance.

He said Canadians like to point to the underground railroad of the mid-19th century as a point of pride for helping blacks escape slavery in the United States, but that pride disguises a long history of racist policies in Canada.

Bailey said that history can be traced to treatment of Canada’s First Peoples, to bans on immigration from certain countries, the Chinese Head tax, the turning away of a boat of Jewish refugees fleeing Europe at the start of the Second World War, and the internment of Japanese Canadians during the Second World War.

But he held out hope that by working together Canadians can get beyond race as “a social construct” and everyone be treated with respect and equality.

At the end of hour-long online discussion, Bulka quoted the late Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., who was assassinated by a white man in the 1960s, by saying “we shall overcome.”