



# MLK DAY LIKE NONE BEFORE IT

## What do we do when we don't agree?



Vaughn Bell has lived in the Westerville area for more than 40 years, nearly all of that time contributing to the community as a representative of the faith community, and in service through Leadership Westerville and the Westerville Martin Luther King, Jr. (MLK) Breakfast Celebration. Since 2008, he has led the volunteer and programming effort for the Breakfast, an event that honors the ideas of MLK and speaks directly to their implementation in the Westerville community.

Now serving on the Westerville City Schools Board of Education, Bell says he felt compelled to continue his service to students, parents, district staff and the community. "Education is the great equalizer," he says. "...it is the key that unlocks the door to future possibilities, and once obtained, it can never be taken away."

In these roles, and with a long and committed record of service in the community, Bell was asked to share his perspective on how Westerville navigates cultural and social issues on which disagreement may exist. The question is: What do we do when we don't agree?

**The social justice movement in 2020 has been divisive in our nation. It has exposed pockets of systemic racism that still exist today. For those seeking solutions and to make authentic contributions to heal our communities, where do we begin?**

We start with the truth. Learn the truth about the conditions that have led us to where we are and allow that awareness to lead to personal action.

We must dedicate ourselves to the elimination of systems of oppression based on the belief in a hierarchy of human value. Start at home with your own family by making sure the books in your home are written by and feature diversity, that your children play with diverse dolls and action figures, watching programs that feature diverse cast members and diverse storylines. You can intentionally involve yourself and your children in groups and activities that are diverse, and you can intentionally develop a diverse group of friends and acquaintances so that you can model for your family and the world what it looks like.

**The process will undoubtedly be complicated. There will be neighbors among us here in Westerville who simply do not agree. What do we do when that happens?**

I think we start by understanding that unity is an essential element of being a community, and "unity" does not require "uniformity." It is not only possible, but necessary for people with different beliefs and positions to live together in harmony. We must respect the right of others to hold a different belief without devaluing their personhood. We must work together where there is agreement, and respect our differences where there is not.

**The recently departed John Lewis is often credited with using the term "The Beloved Community." What does it mean and what does The Beloved Community mean to you and to Westerville?**

The Leadership Westerville Martin Luther King, Jr. Legacy Project has defined the Beloved Community as "a diverse and inclusive community of love, total relatedness, justice and equality for all." For me, the Beloved Community is a community where the inherent value and dignity of all people is respected. It is a place where all persons are loved and accepted, and are free to realize their full potential. That's the kind of community that I and an army of fellow advocates are working towards becoming.

**We have to acknowledge the impact on law enforcement and the community. WPD has been profoundly affected by the social justice movement. In the recent past, WPD was experiencing historic support from the community, especially after the loss of two officers killed in the line of duty. Chief Charles Chandler was the first law enforcement executive in Central Ohio to publicly condemn the murder of George Floyd. But WPD has been/is in an unfamiliar position, directly experiencing anger, resentment and distrust. How do we acknowledge this moving forward and heal?**

We begin by acknowledging the complicated history between law enforcement and BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) persons in the United States. Historically, violence and brutality against people of color created a lack of trust between law enforcement and many of those whom they are sworn to protect and serve.

We must also understand that you can support law enforcement and support criminal justice reforms at the same time. These are not mutually exclusive positions and not everyone has had the same experience in dealing with law enforcement.

I fully support Chief Chandler's commitment to diversifying WPD, and his continued emphasis on community policing. The loss of two heroic officers was a tragic loss for WPD and our community; to this day it breaks my heart when I think about it. As a community we grieve their loss and honor their service and memory.

We must also understand that there are members of our community that have had negative experiences with WPD. These two things are true simultaneously and one does not negate the other. Yet, we must be careful not to project onto WPD the characteristics and behaviors of other departments. We cannot hold the policies and conduct of other departments against WPD, we have to get to know how our division of police operates.

I love, respect, and defend the men and women of WPD and law enforcement everywhere. It is truly one of the most dangerous and difficult occupations in the world and I am grateful for their commitment to protect us and serve us. My respect and support is not blind support. I believe we must support law enforcement and hold them accountable for illegal actions at the same time.

How do we chart a path forward? I believe we begin by having open honest dialogue that involves listening to one another and learning from one another. I have been part of a group of community leaders that met with Chief Chandler to discuss the current state of WPD and community relations. Out of this, and other very productive conversations, there was agreement that we would begin a series of facilitated Community Conversations in 2021 with a goal of collective listening and learning. Together, we can strengthen the relationship between WPD and the community and ensure that it remains a positive one.

**Is there hope? What do we do when we don't agree?**

YES! There is hope. My faith gives me hope and the strength to keep pressing forward. I am filled with hope when I see the promise and potential in the next generation. I have hope in the prospect of a better and brighter tomorrow.

When we disagree, we must not diminish the personhood or humanity of those with whom we disagree. The fact that we do not all think alike or believe the same thing can become a source of strength that benefits us all if we allow it to.

There are no quick fixes or one size fits all cures that leads to community. Community takes time and requires patience. We must lead with love and live out the change we want to see in the world and by doing so, I am confident that Westerville can become the Beloved Community.

## Westerville MLK Breakfast Celebration

How will the 2021 Westerville MLK Breakfast Celebration address what we have walked through as a community these many months?

Bell: The 2021 Westerville MLK Breakfast Celebration will address our collective experience by acknowledging where we have been and charting a course for where we go from here. It is an understatement to say that 2020 was a year like no other. We have experienced a global pandemic that has disrupted every area of our lives, there has been civil unrest, and the most divisive presidential election in modern history. All of this has taken a toll on the American people and what we want to focus our attention on with the 2021 MLK Breakfast is how we heal from this and continue our collective journey towards becoming "a more perfect Union."

The theme for the Breakfast is "The Moral Imperative To Love." The way forward will require that we intentionally commit ourselves to loving one another. We cannot legislate our way out of our current situation, we cannot arrest our way out of it, and we cannot ignore our situation and hope that it will get better.

Our keynote speaker is Father Joseph Kovitch, pastor of St. Matthew's Episcopal Church in Westerville, and he will share with us out of his heart how love is the way to healing and wholeness. Father Kovitch will offer a definition of love, cast a vision of what love looks like, and challenge us to live a life that expresses love.

16th Annual  
**MARTIN LUTHER  
KING JR.  
VIRTUAL CELEBRATION**

Monday, January 18  
8 a.m.

To register visit  
[westervillechamber.com](http://westervillechamber.com).