

The Power of One: Unity march brings together Altonians

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ALTON - More than 50 people from various walks of life joined together at the **Scott Bibb Center** on East Fifth Street early Saturday morning to show unity.

The gathering was a culmination of a week-long crusade championed by several members of Alton's faith community. Event co-organizer **Jason Harrison** said several hundred people came to the crusade nights, which were held at **2nd Chances**

Community Church on North Alby in Godfrey. Each night of the crusade, a faith leader from the community spoke of unity, what it means and what it looks like when put into action. Saturday morning's gathering led to a march from the Scott Bibb Center to the **Liberty Bank Riverfront Amphitheater** where a job fair was taking place alongside other community activities.

"We focused on what it looks like being one," Harrison said. "We focused on love, forgiveness, meeting our neighbors and extending our focus. We spoke about what that looks like in action. To end that, we march in unity, not to so we will be unified, but to show we are unified."



Marchers were escorted by two members of the **Alton Police Department** on bicycle as well as one unit in a patrol car as they marched from the center to the amphitheater. Chants were yelled and songs of praise were sung as the group made its way across Broadway. Signs declaring faith, unity and love were made by community member **Holly Neeley** and her children.

Once at the amphitheater, marchers gathered at the front of the stage to hear words from Harrison, **Alton Police Chief Jason Simmons** and **Alton Ministerial Alliance President Peter Hough**. Harrison said this would ensure the feeling of unity would extend from the end of the march into the daily lives of all those in attendance.

"The message today is going from knowing how things are true to knowing how true they are," Hough said before the march.

That theme carried through Hough's speech, during which he invoked the Apostle Peter as well as his more modern role model, **Martin Luther King, Jr.**

"We know unity is needed, but we don't know how true that is," Hough said. "We know racism exists, but we don't know how much it really affects our neighbors."

Hough's speech at the amphitheater was a call to action to all those assembled. He said people believe change is necessary, but also seem to think it will happen automatically, or will occur by default by the hand of "someone else." He called those assembled to actively go where they would not normally go and speak to people they would not normally seek.



"We hope we get the city we want," Hough said. "But, if we don't work together, we will get the city we deserve."

He continued to describe the hours holding Sunday morning church services as "the most segregated hours in America." He said the path to unity could be found through the message of King as well as the message of Jesus, which King followed.

"People want to pick and choose aspects of the life of Dr. King, but they don't want the soil that life grew out of, which was rooted in prayer and fasting," he said. "We can't wait for the world to come to church, we need the church to go into the world. "

The riots in **Ferguson** following the death of 18-year-old **Mike Brown** at the hands of police officer Darren Wilson were brought into Hough's message as well.

"In those following weeks, I'm sure everyone remembers the riots and the fires, but there was one night of peace, and it was the night the church marched," he said.

Repentance, vulnerability and drawing near were the solutions Hough suggested as he ended his speech with a prayer, calling all those assembled to join hands as a human chain. He also called for people to listen to each other and believe their stories. He said people should hear perspectives differing from their own and said their view of the city may not be the same as the views of their neighbors.



During his speech, Chief Simmons described the police as people and members of the community instead of figments of the media and demonized concepts. He said police officers want community change as much as everyone else.

"How we use our anger is what defines us as human," he said. "We should use our voices to make change. We're part of the community as well, and we want change too."

Following the speeches, marchers were able to attend a job fair and have family fun with bounce houses and a dunking booth featuring officers of the Alton Police Department as dunk targets.

