

**Statement of the Reverend Virginia (Gini) Gerbasi
Before the Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Civil Liberties,
Committee on Oversight & Reform, United States House of Representatives**

June 29, 2020

Chairman Raskin, Ranking Member Roy, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to contribute to today’s briefing. My name is Gini Gerbasi, and I serve as the Rector at St. John’s Episcopal Church in Georgetown. Before assuming my current role, I previously served on the clergy staff of St. John’s Lafayette Square.

I would like to begin today by acknowledging the millions of Americans who have participated in peaceful protests in response to the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Tamir Rice, and so many others. I believe this is a defining moment in our nation’s history, and I would be remiss if I did not give appropriate attention to these brave Americans who have experienced, witnessed, or recognized injustice and have decided they must take action and make their voices heard. It is their pursuit of justice—by the thousands and even millions across the country and across the globe—that has brought us here today. In fact, the only reason I am testifying before you is because I witnessed, firsthand, what happened when this movement—a profound force for good—was met with the arbitrary and brutal force of its government, quashing the ability of protesters to peaceably assemble and demonstrate on the defining issues of racism, racial justice, and the respect and dignity to which every human being is entitled.

My ministry brought me to Lafayette Square on June 1, 2020. The day before, during my sermon, I looked directly into the camera on my laptop—because that’s how we preach these days—and called the Church to account for its lack of leadership in dismantling systemic racism. That Sunday was the feast of Pentecost, when Christians celebrate receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit, and I lamented that for *centuries* the Church has squandered this mighty gift, and has not had the courage to stand up and cast out the evil of racism from our civic body in the name of love.

Throughout my career, I have been committed to standing up for those on the margins. These convictions drew me to Seminary, and they likewise drew me to Lafayette Square almost a month ago. Racial justice, rooted in Scripture, is a critical ministry of the Episcopal Church in the Diocese of Washington.

As I previously served at St. John’s Lafayette Square, I am intimately familiar with that church, its surroundings, and the unique role it has played in American history as the Church of Presidents. While enjoying historic proximity to power, St. John’s Lafayette Square has also been a constant witness to those who would speak truth to power, on issues across the political spectrum and as diverse as our great country. That Monday, I was there on behalf of the Church to provide comfort and support to these peaceful protesters, and to stand in solidarity with them and the cause of racial justice. And then, before my eyes, the government brutalized peaceful protesters.

To be clear, the day was marked by peaceful protests. Our group of clergy was based on the “patio” of St. John’s Lafayette Square—an outdoor area regularly used by the church for gatherings and ministry. We were passing out water, snacks, hand sanitizer, masks, and trying to

ensure that the patio area was a place of respite for the people gathered. It struck me that the patio had also become a deeply spiritual place that day—you wouldn't think that Episcopalians do this, but we were praying with people, laying hands on people, and offering spiritual comfort. I would occasionally venture into the crowd to ask people if they wanted water. You could hear the people with megaphones shouting, "No Justice, No Peace, No Racist Police."

Part of our purpose, as clergy, in going down to Lafayette Square that day was to be a presence of peace. And for nearly the entire day, peace is what we found there. By 6 p.m., it seemed clear that there was not a lot of tension, and many of my colleagues began to leave. We gave our extra water bottles to the Black Lives Matter medics who had also set up on the St. John's patio. I resolved to stay as long as I could be useful. I could still pray with people and pass out the case or so of water I had left.

And then, sometime after 6:15 p.m., things changed in an instant. Suddenly, I saw protesters running from Lafayette Park, followed by clouds of acrid smoke billowing through the crowds. People began to run north on 16th Street and onto the St. John's patio, some coming for eyewash, wet paper towels or water. The first flash grenade rang out, sounding like gunfire, and some people dropped to the ground, thinking the police were shooting. More people ran in our direction, crying from the smoke and from fear. I remember looking at my watch because I could not understand what was happening. It was 6:36 p.m.—well before curfew. I hadn't heard any announcement or warning; there was nothing that I had seen or heard that could explain the police's actions. People were running, crying, and dropping to the ground in terror. It was dehumanizing.

As the protestors ran from the park, I called out, "Water! Eyewash!" in an attempt to assist the fleeing protestors. A man knelt in front of me, coughing and terrified, his eyes swollen and red. He begged for something to help the stinging, and I began to rinse his eyes. Someone yelled "rubber bullets," and I looked up to see a man holding his stomach, bent over. He moved his arms, and I saw marks on his shirt. I looked over his shoulder, and I couldn't believe my eyes. A wall of police, in full riot gear, was physically pushing people off the St. John's patio, maybe 15 feet away from me.

This scene was shocking, and the terrified faces of the protestors continue to haunt me. They were peacefully protesting the government's use of violence against innocent people. And then the government used violence against them. That alone left me badly shaken. But when I later found out that the President had—just minutes later—stood in front of the church and held up a Bible, I was outraged. *My colleagues and I were there in the name of those same Scriptures.* We were praying with people, and giving them water and food and—after they were attacked by the police—first aid care. To hold up those same Scriptures after using tear gas and rubber bullets and flash grenades against innocent people was horrifying. I say this not to make a political point but to raise an objective truth—the scene I witnessed would have been equally devastating regardless of who occupied the White House.

I couldn't sleep that night. I kept thinking about what had happened—and why. But then, with the dawn of a new day, I asked myself: How can I be a force for goodness today? I knew I had to return to Lafayette Square. The days that followed were trying in their own way. The following Wednesday, although there was no more tear gas or rubber bullets, police in full riot

gear—not wearing any identifying information—blocked us from getting to a prayer vigil at the church. Let me reiterate this: we were not permitted to gather at our church to pray. This, like the earlier events of June 1, is antithetical to everything we hold dear in this country, and should be abhorrent to people of all faiths.

I will never forget what I witnessed in Lafayette Square, and I hope I never witness anything like it ever again. But as I look at the nation’s response—not only to the events of June 1, but more importantly, to this critical moment and the pursuit of justice—I cannot help but be filled with hope. I am here today to offer my account of these events, but more broadly, to add my voice to the chorus demanding racial justice, and to ensure that what happened in Lafayette Square that evening never happens again. I look forward to answering your questions.