

Report On Synodal Listening Sessions, February 2, 2025 Concerning The Black Lives Matter Banner in Front of Holy Trinity Church

At the November 2024 Parish Pastoral Council meeting, a parishioner asked whether it was time to remove the Black Lives Matter banner in front of the Church. There was no extensive rationale given for doing so.

As the Council discussed the question it became clear that it was an issue with many sides to it and that there was no overall “policy” about banners hanging on the property. It was decided that this might be an appropriate opportunity to seek wide parishioner input rather than rely on those who sent emails or might show up at future council meetings. The expectation is that this discussion would support discernment on what to do.

The Pastor and Parish Associate for Social Justice contacted the Restorative Justice ministry whose members had supported such widespread listening sessions several times in recent years. Together they created the plan for synodal listening sessions. The sessions were advertised in the bulletin and e-letter for several weeks in January. Interested parties were asked to register, so there would be an estimate of the numbers to help with planning.

On February 2, 2025, in-person listening sessions took place in Trinity Hall that had about 70-75 participants. In the afternoon a Zoom session with 24 screens (some with two people) was also held. In addition any parishioner who was not able to attend either session had the opportunity to mail in their responses to the issues by email. (see attached document sent to all registrants)

Rather than wide open discussion of “banners” the parish leadership wanted the input to focus on specific topics. During each session, participants gathered in small groups of 8-10 with a moderator and a recorder (volunteers from the Parish staff, the Restorative Justice Ministry, the Parish Council and the Social Justice Committee).

Each group used a “circle process” that gave each person a chance to respond to the posed questions while the others listened respectfully without interruption. The four questions were:

1. Knowing the history of the banner and in light of our parish’s mission, what feelings did the sign evoke in you when it was put up and what does it evoke in you today? Has anyone commented to you about this banner?
2. What do you think the impact would be in the parish, the neighborhood and in our larger community by (1) taking it down, or (2) leaving it up?
3. Is there another banner that would have an equal or greater impact on our parish’s commitment to social and racial justice?

4. Given our mission as a Jesuit parish, how should the parish discern and decide about hanging banners in the future?

What follows is a summary of the responses to each of the four questions. There are comments directly from the recorders' notes. These are meant to be examples, not the totality of what is in the notes. (#) is a rough indicator of how often the same or very similar comments were made.

After answering the four discussion questions, each group conducted a straw poll of their opinions on three topics. The results were:

Should we remove the BLM banner?

Yes	No	Don't Know
16.5%	76.5%	7.1%

If we take down this banner, should we put up something else signifying the parish's commitment to racial justice and healing?

Yes	No	Don't know
56.3%	26.8%	16.9%

Has this listening session given you an opportunity to express your views?

Yes	No	Don't Know
97.3%	1.4%	1.4%

Hopefully, this information will be helpful to the Pastoral Parish Council's discernment. While the Council listens to the participants, there is a reciprocal obligation for it to report to the parish what they heard, and of course what their decisions are.

Our thanks to the group moderators: Rudy Dehaney, Catherine Heinhold, Frances Kummer Paul Maco, Don McCrabb, Ellen Touns, Ted Tschudy.

The recorders: Judith Bunnell, Megan Dennis, Roli Diaz, Jim Hennesy, Terry O'Hara Lavoie, Jacqui Pascal, Paul Ravenscroft, Tania Chomiak Salvi, Lauren Wolkov.

This report was compiled from recorder notes and comments submitted by email by Ashley Klick, Ted Newton, Arlene Pietranton and Bob Stump.

Question #1: *Knowing the history of the banner and in light of our parish's mission, what feelings did the sign evoke in you when it was put up and what does it evoke in you today? Has anyone commented to you about this banner?*

“Good/great,” “proud,” “happy,” - these are the initial feelings expressed the most upon the placement of the sign. Many see the sign as a welcome and inclusivity, not to only Black people, but to all who may feel on the margins. They believe the sign is consistent with the values of Holy Trinity, Jesuit social teaching and our call to live out the Gospel. A majority of participants still see the value in having the banner today and are glad and proud it remains. The banner shows our commitment to social justice issues, builds awareness and elicits discussion. It is a symbol of solidarity. Distractors from the banner highlighted that it should support “all lives” and that wording on it is linked to an organization perceived to be anti-police.

Comments about the banner ranged from positivity to concerns that Holy Trinity is too political and that it disrupts the aesthetics of the campus.

● **Feelings when the banner went up:**

- Excited
- Good/Great (15)
- Grateful (2)
- Happy/glad (8)
- Neutral; concerned that it might increase division.
- Proud/Pride (25)
- Sad that we need it.
- Banner is condescending.
- Banner is inappropriate – this is a Christian parish and all lives matter.
- Chose HTS because of the banner.
- Consistent with the values of the parish, Jesuit social teaching, living the gospel (15)
- Consistent with the work of the history committee; shows follow through with the plaque noting that at one time black lives did not matter in our church/HT; part of making reparations. (9)
- Courage to speak out to power; don’t “put our light under a bushel basket”.
- Did not approve because its message is linked with an organization perceived to be violent and anti-police. (2)
- Don’t like talking about race and social justice; political messages don’t belong in front of church. (2)
- Evokes commitment to social justice.
- Makes my parents and family more involved knowing we are going to a supportive church.
- Not a proponent of outward signs, prefers “doing” vs. “saying”/banners.
- Solidarity with oppressed people. (7)
- Way to resist what is going on in our country (racism, white supremacy) – for parishioners and the parish. (4)
- Welcoming
 - Helps my biracial kids feel that they belong here.
 - Shows support and inclusivity and that all are welcomed. (8)
 - Very important to our family and a sign of safety. (2)
 - Welcomes Black individuals. (2)

- **Feelings the banner evokes today:**

- Anyone who has witnessed injustice in the past 10 years sees the value of these signs.
- Banners can be a first impression to show what we support.
- Banner facilitates discussion.
- Banner lacks visibility coming from the north.
- Banner may have outlived its usefulness (2 times); feels like old news.
- HT alone can't end these issues, but the banner creates awareness and community; this issue has a long history that goes back to the civil rights struggle.
- If we took it down, it would be a sign that we "gave in"/are acquiescing. (6)
- I would stand in front of the banner to prevent anyone from taking it down.
- Nothing in our society has changed, things are trending worse, the banner is still working.
- Ongoing pride. (4)
- Racism is a sin specific to our country, our religion, and our parish. The banner is not a passing campaign or slogan.
- Responsive to today's issues.
- Still glad. (2)
- Taking the banner down will embolden the wrong people/voices in the country and the current administration; wrong time to take the banner down. (6)

- **Has anyone commented to you about this banner:**

- No (5)
- My three adult children commented they don't want to come to HT anymore; other people also don't want to come to HT anymore – HT has become more "in your face", not just a religious place.
- A non-parishioner commented to me that they were "exasperated" that HT has a BLM banner.
- A few others have said to me that there are too many banners and they detract from the aesthetics of the church & the grounds.
- All comments I've heard have been in favor of leaving the banner up.
- People have commented that the banner should say that all lives matter.
- Gonzaga College H.S. doesn't have a BLM banner.
- My children/teens liked it when it went up.
- The School community generally liked it.
- Daughters' HTS peers have said that they feel welcomed because of the sign.
- Heard comments from her relatives – spoke of Biden attending Mass at HT, believe the banner was shown on purpose in the news stories, felt that HT was late in putting it up
- Very positive comments in a recent conversation at HT.
- People outside of the parish have been very positive.

NOTE:

- Three participants had never seen it. They only attend Mass in Trinity Hall.
- The following comments were recorded in reply to Question #1, but are more directly related to Question #4
 - Not sure what process was used to put it up
 - Should have a policy – how long a banner should be up, etc.

Question 2: *What do you think the impact would be in the parish, the neighborhood and in our larger community by (1) taking it down, or (2) leaving it up?*

No matter what we do, there likely would be a range of interpretations even if we are clear as to our reasons. (4)

- It would be totally political either way: Up - Democrats would be happy and down - Republicans would be happy.
- Unfortunate to take the banner down. Expression of commitment to justice and equality. People would think that it became a political response to the election.
- Cannot assume that one way or another that the message will be understood.

Nevertheless, there is the issue of a how long any banner should stay up. See Question 4.

Take it down:

Would remove a “political” statement, which some felt the parish should not be making in the first place. Concern that some may see it as support for a specific political group. (4)

- BLM overstated the impact of police brutality.
- Presence of banner does not encompass opposing views.
- We should not have politics in the church.

We could not avoid interpretations in light of the current political climate. Taking it down at this time would be seen as supporting one side, both in politics and the divided US Catholic Church. (6)

- Timing may be wrong to take it down given current atmosphere.
- Taking the banner down is a capitulation not just to racial politics; it would link HT to reactionary elements in the Catholic Church.

Others felt it had been up long enough and no longer has an impact, or that the message is too narrow, e.g. “All Lives Matter.” And what about other issues? (5)

- Does banner signal we do not support white men.
- Banners considered should include broader discussion than BLM banner.
- Perhaps put up a banner with our mission statement on it.

Taking it down would signal a reversal of Holy Trinity’s support for social and racial justice and could be construed as a support for actions of the new federal administration. (14)

- Taking it down now is wrong given what is happening in government.
- Taking it down would be seen as capitulation to what is going on today.
- People would think that it became political response to the election. Perception that parish is acquiescing to the assault on DEI, given the events of the last few weeks.

It would signal to Black parishioners that we no longer support them and in some cases might move people to leave the parish and / or remove their children from the school.

- My family would have to leave the school and the parish. Teachers might leave as well.

- If the banner comes down, I would have difficulty coming to Mass; the community would no longer feel like one that represents me.

Some non-white school students would question whether the parish still welcomes them. (2)

- Would remove the one thing that makes my children feel they belong here, as some of the few Black people who come to Mass at HT.
- Takes away the only source of support / protection for students who look different than the majority white students.

Removing it would tarnish Holy Trinity's reputation as working toward social justice and possibly say that we think the problems facing Black Americans and other vulnerable communities no longer exist. (10)

- Would hide the fact that we have not made progress against racism.
- We don't believe there is a problem with racism today, here.
- Removing would hide the fact that we have not made progress against racism.

Leave it up:

Sign is an expression of our commitment to justice and equality. Living the gospel. (6)

- Taking it down would not be true to the Gospel.
- It expresses adherence to our Faith.

It signals our purpose and intention to be inclusive. (5)

- Some don't interpret it as only Black Lives Matter ... but that all are welcomed.
- I would feel uncomfortable facing Black parishioners.

Signal's our Parish's welcoming of non-white people to our parish and our school. Makes people of color feel comfortable in this non-diverse community. (6)

- Expresses solidarity with Black Americans.
- Signals HT School is a welcoming place.

Has an impact on our school population. Some parents are attracted because of its message and others might leave if it was removed. (2)

- Keeping it makes me and my child feel welcome in this non-diverse place.

Students notice it and hear the messages of inclusion and welcoming. (4)

- 6th to 8th grade kids notice; a small gesture that speaks to inclusivity.

In combination with the sign about our past racial history, it is a small way of showing that we believe in correcting the past and that we continue to work toward justice. (3)

- We have an embarrassing history, especially with Fr. Neale, and this is a small way of showing that we believe in correcting the past.
- Our history is important to Holy Trinity and Georgetown U. We need to make a special emphasis.

Taking it down would likely have a greater negative impact than leaving it up. It is counterintuitive to take it down if we are committed to social justice (4)

The sign should stay up indefinitely.

Taking the banner down would be harmful/negative/hurtful/a mistake; it would make people feel angry/sad/disappointed.

Question 3: “Is there another banner that would have an equal or greater impact on our parish’s commitment to social and racial justice?”

Overall, the consensus was that a different “replacement” banner would not have the same impact. There were a few ideas for replacements, but most were somewhat vague or not fully thought out.

A few important themes emerged from those opposed to removing the sign: First, now is not the time, with the new Administration’s assault on DEI, gender, immigrants, etc. Second, the sign is important for HTS students to see. Third, the sign is important for visitors and passersby to see.

A final observation which came from some participants – The sign has been in the same place for years, and perhaps we’ve all stopped paying attention to it. Keeping it but moving it might be a solution to make sure that more people see it.

Racism Still Exists/No Other Banner Would Suffice:

- Did we accomplish the purpose for which you put the banner up?
- At this time, I think not. The term Black Lives Matter is widely recognized and understood. Important to have a statement that people know what it means. As we know, African Americans are the only group that came to our shores as chattel property – still trying to overcome that they were not considered as humans for 400 years.
- Not a great fan of banners – a skeptic of what impact they have. But the message of Black Lives Matter has unique impact. Can’t think of another banner that could have as much or more impact.
- Replacing it with another banner would not have the same impact.
- Another banner may express another value but could not replace the Black Lives Banner.
- Youth Group: We need to be specific not generic.
- “Black Lives Matter” is still important, because everybody knows that White lives matter.
- No other banner would be better than the one we have now. We are too far from fixing the problem of racism.
- Nothing could replace the current banner, because the impact of replacing it would be too strong. Too few people get an education about racism in the U.S., and the Jesuits are one of the few sources of that education nationwide.
- Hard to think of one that would hit harder given our parish’s history.
- No other banner could replace it. Removing it would be whitewashing.
- Nothing we could put up has more impact on the historic connection between BLM and the civil rights movement.

- BLM banner represents the Second Civil Rights Movement.
- I don't think there could be another banner that could express commitment to social justice as this one does.
- Don't think there is any other banner. There is no other race that has suffered so profoundly - slavery, lynchings - not the same as other immigrant/population groups in the US. It's easy to have social mobility unless you're Black. Does not think any other sign would work.

NOW Is Definitely Not The Time

- Taking the banner down, especially now in light of the current climate when there is a tearing down of policies that have been put into place to protect the more vulnerable members of our community, feels especially demoralizing.
- Anxiety level of the last two weeks and lack of humanity and mercy, support for Bishop Budde, support for Middle East, and so many others.
- Sends a wrong signal at this time.
- Compensation of place. We are in a place of conflict. Taking down the banner now, it would be taken in a negative way.
- It is not the right time.
- To take it down, it is a sense that we have taken it down out of fear. Have worked with Black people, US and Africa, and know their pain and sensitivities, especially with this assault on DEI.
- As our Nation is amid a large and impactful political administration change, with a focus on further disenfranchising people of color with the use of subversively hateful rhetoric coded in the term "DEI," the removal of the sign would signal capitulation to the current pervasive political climate from the Holy Trinity Church and School.
- I understand that we might not want to keep it up forever and ever, but I think that this moment is a very bad time to remove it. The d*mn president just blamed DEI for the plane crash, for goodness sake!

Don't Replace It, Period

- It would be a capitulation.
- It gives witness to our faith. It would be a bad thing.
- It is an important message for our kids at the school.
- The banner is irreplaceable because of its history.
- I would like to keep it up as long as I live. It says we are sorry about our past sins.
- Virtue in constancy.
- I can't think of a better banner than what has been hung.
- We would be abandoning our principles.

Important For HTS Students

- Good that the sign is before the Church - between the two schools. The kids see it everyday as they move between the two buildings.
- There is a now a Black Student Union at HTS for the first time (after the N word was written on HTS property).
- The banner's presence has been a meaningful and powerful message - to ensure my son is aware of what is going on in the world around him and understands the importance of standing up and being a person for others and to ensure my son's classmates and friends feel valued and supported.
- While the presence of the "Black Lives Matter" banner does not change the school's approach to dealing with these advertent and inadvertent issues that arise, it does symbolize hope, belonging, and a tangible commitment to social justice and inclusivity for students of color who are largely underrepresented in the school community.
- A lot of emotion among some in the school about the possibility of replacing the banner. Do not think it could be replaced with anything of greater importance.

Important For Visitors And Passersby

- For visitors, it begins a conversation.
- We are not backing down. A good message to the Georgetown Students.
- You never know who walks by there. It provokes a conversation. It gets people to talk.
- Outside has an impact on neighbors and “passers by” which is important as well.
- I am thinking of impact to others that walk by. Like the new students at Georgetown or the tourists or the newcomers to the church. It matters for them to see it.

Thoughts re: Other Banners:

- We could add more banners: LGBTQ+, Black, Asian, Immigrants.
- Add more marginalized groups: veterans, disabled.
- Bigger sign that says All are welcome and add ideas of solidarity.
- That banner has a life/impact of its own. Perhaps something in addition to address the important issues related to Migrants.
- Agree with what has been said. Perhaps we need a banner for the refugees.
- It speaks loudly. We may want to add another banner. Because we reach out to others. Perhaps we should be a sanctuary Church?
- The question of did we accomplish is interesting and worth exploring? Maybe a banner that says something like “we believe that black lives matter, women’s rights are human rights, no human is illegal, love is love and kindness is everything”. Right now there are so many marginalized beyond that banner.
- Welcome the stranger, something that speaks to immigrants.
- I thought a banner dealing with immigrants would be helpful as that is an issue at the forefront right now. Likes the idea of a religious tie-in/verse for the next Black Lives Matter banner. His wife is Methodist and her church has an “All are Welcome” sign with a Micah scripture with some banners that go in front of the church for specific social issues that are being spoken of by the pastor.
- “We are committed to racial and social justice”.
- I am not opposed to a different banner, but it must be focused on racial justice due to our history and have the support of the black community.
- “All are welcome” is a great message, but saying “everyone is welcome” has a specific meaning in the Black Lives Matter movement and I want to be careful about that.
- Could look for something new to show we’re still with Catholic social teaching and also not staying stagnant. What is the spirit saying to us today? We’ve done a lot of work in the racial healing space. Is there a way to move us forward?
- For a social justice banner, it may make sense to have times when banners are there and then when they’re not (i.e. something involving the readings or liturgical calendar).
- Something that evokes the Jesuit mission. “A community for others.” Something that social justice is broader than race. We are getting stuck on race and that is one bucket (an important one) and one of many issues about social justice: ageism, women, etc. Some sort of message that is broader: “All lives matter” that would include abortion. Some sort of umbrella phrase that captures the broader message that captures that any person who walks by it would feel connected.
- Pick something not related to a non-Catholic organization.
- Pick something grounded in Catholic Social Justice Teachings.
- Need more time to think of alternatives.
- I don’t know if I can think of another banner off the top of my head. Something broader that is focused on social justice. Some phrasing possible that might be broader and focus on social justice. Some churches have banners that highlight who is welcome in their church (e.g., pride flag). That is a wonderful thing if someone is seeking to connect with God, they want to feel like they are in a place that is safe for them. We are in a period of upheaval and the Church can stand on the foundation of Christ. We can do many Jesuit mottos, but it is a piece of a much larger puzzle.
- Black Lives Matter, Immigrant Lives Matter, All Lives Matter — We are all God’s Children.

- Having admitted that "Ordain Women" would not see the light of day, I suggest we place the Mission Statement on a poster and hang it from the fence.

Maybe People Are Missing It Because It's Been In The Same Place For Years

- It is like the Star-Spangled Banner. I do not notice it all the time but there are times when it comes into focus. "The flag is still there."
- Sometimes if things stay in one place for a long time, people just get used to it and stop thinking about it.
- We all see it and don't really take it in anymore.

We Need A Process For Banners

- Is there a process by which someone at parish suggests banners?
- Need a process for banners.
- Process should include mechanics for approval and substance of message.
- OK to have time limits or review process to keep banners up.
- Need to have a Synodal discussion to determine replacement if any.

A Few Were Against The BLM Banner

- AMDG, black friends are "sick" of being singled out. Daughter at school would not fill out "Caucasian" because not Asian. Since that point, has only heard race. Grew up in PG county where was bused. Need something different. AMDG - larger, more inclusive message.
- Replace the banner with a crucifix.

Question 4: *Given our Mission as a Jesuit parish, how should the parish discern and decide about hanging banners in the future?*

With one exception, all participants found the synodal listening session a positive experience for sharing one's viewpoints: "good process/important process/listening in a peaceful way." Most participants believe that decisions about banners should be made by the PPC and Pastor after consultation with parishioners either through a poll/vote or similar listening process. Several recommended a committee <communications committee?> be in place.

Most agreed there should be a process; one suggestion was that a ministry proposes it to the PPC and then a period of discernment/input occurs. Timeline for a banner did not seem to be as important to majority of participants, but some participants suggested a committee or similar that reviews banner quarterly or that we link banners to the liturgical year, i.e. Women's History Month or World Day of Migrants & Refugees with monthly limits. Additional support was for banners that had a link to scripture.

One note to the process is identifying when the parish goes into synodal discussion and what should be the trigger. Should one voice start a questioning process, or should there be a petition or similar?

- Good process, but probably too much for each banner.
- Synodal process is a good process/listening in a peaceful way. (11)

- Pastor should consult with other Jesuits, PPC and parishioners as much as possible/should not be limited to parish council or committees/school should be included. (3)
 - PPC and pastor should make decision after collecting input like this. (5)
 - Take the banner down when there is a resolution - not a predetermined time.
 - Future banners require a committee.
 - Parish wide voting in the future. (4)
 - Banners should be a low priority of the parish: the community of parishioners, homilies and synodality are the priority.
 - Parish council should not make the decision/pastor should not be final authority - use synodal process. (3)
 - Should be more than one voice that starts the questioning process. Maybe a petition process to start the ball rolling/ do we need a policy on when the parish goes into synod? (3)
 - Focus on communication.
 - Need a process: social justice committee - PPC - Pastor /timeline for consideration/revisit/ discernment. (4)
 - Ask is it for the greater good/addition of scripture/link to liturgical calendar.
 - People/media pay attention to what happens here.
 - Pick Catholic side over politics/appropriate venue for democracy to be shown.
 - If a big issue comes up, we should post a sign.
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- Perception that everything is top-down, that the lay person does not have a voice. There are a lot of people who are curious about the church and searching. Having this process be shared so it does not seem like it is a top-down decision.
 - A process like this is important. Few places where we can talk to people with different views in a peaceful way. To hear different views and think about them. I think it is a good thing.
 - Essential for the future of our democracy that we have a discussion of our issues. I have never heard some of the things others said about racism and others' children's experiences about race. To listen to each other is essential and vital as well as to express our own opinions.
 - Has been on different settings where has had to make decisions about process. We have a governing system (PPC and clergy) and using own background as clergy. Would be helpful to have a process for banner. Maybe have a banner about Jesuit presence. Whether there are 'turnstile' banners (e.g., ads for HTS golf or events that come and go). Things get put up via a process. Processes protect everybody. Having this process for every banner is not feasible. No banner should be up for four years outside of a banner about Jesuits.
 - Should be a process, but anything political does not belong in a church. Not interested in hearing a political message in a church. A lot of people are unhappy with perception of political messages at HT and have stopped attending and contributing and that he knows that contributions are way down.

Background on the BLM banner at Holy Trinity

Holy Trinity has a long history of commitment to Social Justice. In recent years, the Parish has sponsored many activities and events focusing specifically on the scourge of racism in the U.S. Our concerns include the history of mistreatment of our parishioners and their descendants as well as concern for the impact of discrimination throughout our culture.

We've had speakers, forums, small and large group discussions, and other events to learn about and discuss related issues. Many parishioners became more aware of these issues after the murders of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor in spring of 2020.

Over the summer of 2020, the Parish Pastoral Council, Staff and several groups went through a period of discernment about how our Parish could publicly show its concern and commitment to fighting the continued mistreatment of citizens, particularly descendants of the enslaved and other Black citizens.

The Council unanimously recommended to Fr. Gillespie and he agreed that we should have a customized banner proclaiming "Black Lives Matter" hung on the fence in front of the church. It appeared in October 2020. In 2023, the BLM banner was showing some wear. After hearing from various groups, the Council and Pastor agreed to keep the banner.

The Council, Staff and Pastor are now in a period of discernment about what to do with this and any other banners we may display in the future.

You have signed up to express your views on specific questions facing the parish leadership during synodal listening sessions of February 2. These will not be wide-open discussions. Rather they will focus on questions on which the parish leadership wants your opinion.

Moderators will conduct the session, and recorders will capture the responses without personally identifying who said what. A report will be prepared and shared with the Council, Staff and Pastor shortly after these events.

If, at the end of this discussion, you feel you have more to say in response to these questions, please send an email to communications@trinity.org by Tuesday evening February 4th.

Time for each person to speak will be limited so please come with your **succinct and direct answers** to these questions.

1. Knowing the history of the banner and in light of our parish's mission, what feelings did the sign evoke in you when it was put up and what does it evoke in you today? Has anyone commented to you about this banner?
2. What do you think the impact would be the in parish, the neighborhood and in our larger our community by (1) taking it down, or (2) leaving it up?
3. Is there another banner that would have an equal or greater impact on our parish's commitment to social and racial justice
4. Given our mission as a Jesuit parish, how should the parish discern and decide about hanging banners in the future?