

Pastor who took a bullet continues to lead her AME flock near Ferguson

by [Lilly Fowler](#)

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ST. CHARLES, Missouri (RNS) The first time the public heard the name Renita Lamkin was probably the day she was shot.

In early August, four days after teenager Michael Brown was killed by police, Lamkin, a pastor, stood with Ferguson protesters. Police had warned the crowd to disperse and Lamkin shouted, "They're leaving!" in an effort to buy a little time.

"That's when I felt a pop in the stomach," Lamkin, 44, said of the rubber pellet that hit her and left a large, purple wound.

Fast forward nearly three months and Lamkin continues to deliver a message of defiance as pastor of an African Methodist Episcopal Church in St. Charles.

The AME denomination, born out of the resistance to racial discrimination and slavery, has more than 2.5 million members, most of them African-American.

"We can and should be defiant," Lamkin told her congregation on a recent Sunday at St. John AME Church. "There will always be those who discount the voice of the poor."

But "we don't have to accept the conditions of this world."

Lamkin's engagement in the protests was influenced by being the mother of two African-American children and witnessing their experiences growing up in St. Louis.

"My kids would be suspended for things that other kids would just have a detention for," Lamkin said when describing the treatment of African-Americans in schools.

"It's painting all these kids as if they're these gangsters who are out killing everybody."

Lamkin said she's outraged by what she sees as unnecessary police brutality, even in cases where the victim may have been guilty of certain crimes.

The philosophy of the African Methodist Episcopal Church also informs her work in Ferguson.

Dennis C. Dickerson, a history professor at Vanderbilt University who taught Lamkin, says the "social protest and social insurgency" ethos that's "baked into the church's DNA" appealed to her.

Michael Joseph Brown, academic dean at Payne Theological Seminary in Wilberforce, Ohio, noted that Lamkin was the only Caucasian in her graduating class at Payne in 2014.

"She's a rare breed of person to be both white and female in an overwhelming black denomination where the ministry is overwhelming male," he said.

Lamkin hadn't planned to be a pastor, but because of her knowledge of scripture—from an early age she read the Bible three or four times a year—she was repeatedly invited to preach. She said her fate was sealed when she met a woman in a Bible study who was a pastor in the AME church.

"People trust me with their stories and trust me to speak from God's heart to theirs, and I don't take that trust lightly," she said.

Lamkin survived a painful past. When she was 4 when her mother died in a car wreck. She and her three siblings were raised by their grandmother, attending a Pentecostal church in Kansas City.

A youth pastor, as well as a cousin, sexually abused her.

She was also abused by the father of her children. The two met in high school and were together for seven years. Lamkin knew she had to leave him on the day that he threatened her with a gun and accidentally shot himself instead.

"That is when I said to God, 'You got to get me out of here, one of us is going to die,'"
" Lamkin said.

When she had enough money to put down a payment for a rental property, she and a friend loaded up a Pontiac Trans Am with everything they could and left.

In her life as a pastor now, Ferguson has raised many concerns, especially police comportment.

When asked if she's fearful of what might happen when the grand jury's decision on indicting by the officer who shot Brown is released, Lamkin said the regular group of protesters in Ferguson is not violent.

"They're angry, they're loud, they're intense, they say a lot of cuss words, but they're not violent," she said.

Lamkin said arresting Wilson would send a message that there is accountability for police actions.

"They can't shoot first," Lamkin said, "and figure it out later."

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