

After Ferguson decision, black churches rekindle leadership for long-term social change

by [Harry Bruinius](#)

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([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) The hand-folded paper peace cranes that now adorn the altar and pulpit at Christ the King United Church of Christ in Florissant, Missouri, a mostly-black congregation near Ferguson, have been passed-on symbols of hope, peace, and solidarity for many churches across the country during times of national crisis.

The origami-like paper cranes came to Christ the King earlier this year from Old South Church in Boston, which had displayed them after the Boston Marathon bombing last year. Before that, the traveling peace symbols hung in the sanctuary of Newtown Congregational, following the shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary in 2012.

And as communities across the country begin to prepare for celebrations of universal goodwill and thanksgiving this week, such symbols are taking on added urgency as the nation awaits the decision of a Missouri grand jury, which announced Monday (November 24) that it would not indict a Ferguson police officer in the shooting death of black teen Michael Brown.

The case, like that of Trayvon Martin in Florida last year and the police killing of Eric Garner in New York earlier this summer, has sparked racial tensions in the country and laid bare a racial divide that continues to fuel civil unrest, including the often violent protests that took place after Officer Darren Wilson shot and killed Brown in August.

"The anxiety level in the community as a whole is off the charts," said Traci Blackmon, pastor of Christ the King, on Sunday, according to CBS News.

But in many ways, black churches and other congregations have taken the lead, not only as promoters of peace through the crisis, but as leaders in a growing effort to

mobilize what some have called a new civil rights movement.

“Our congregations are going to be engaging in what we’re calling ‘sacred conversations’ and really talk out really what has been happening the past few months,” says Susan Sneed, an organizer with Metropolitan Congregations United in St. Louis, a consortium of local churches devoted to addressing social issues. “We want to really talk about race and racism, and how it has shaped our community, and how we need to reshape our community in different ways, and try to move forward on some long term plans to make real change that hasn’t been done in the past.”

Some member churches with Metropolitan Congregations United also agreed to be 24/7 “safe places” for demonstrators. Other churches were open for prayer after the grand jury handed down its decision.

For some pastors, the unrest unleashed by the shooting of Brown could help rekindle the role of black faith communities as leaders in a long-term effort to effect social changes.

“The church did go to sleep for a while,” said Karen Anderson, pastor of Ward Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church, another congregation in the neighboring town Florissant, according to Bloomberg. “The church is awakening to the role it can play in helping to bring the community together, helping to educate.”

In her sermon Sunday, Blackmon compared the protests in Ferguson to the 1955 Montgomery bus boycott in Alabama that helped usher in the civil rights demonstrations of earlier generations.

And though she urged for calm and peaceful protests after the grand jury decision, she told her congregation that it must continue to stand together for change, according to BBC News.

"The same schools will remain," Blackmon preached, "the same rates of incarceration will remain and the same racial profiling will remain."