

Continuing the conversation

by [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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Ed Blum: I adore my church. In fact, it's the only church I've called "my church" since college. Several weeks ago, when there was no mention of Ferguson or racial injustice during services, I felt frustrated. Rather than turn to the pastoral staff, I publicized my experience and looked to pastors [Leslie Callahan](#) and [Carol Howard Merritt](#) for insight for how pastors and laypeople, like myself, could address these topics. I did not want to personalize the matter since I had been to many white churches where issues of race were hardly ever mentioned. So, when introducing Callahan's and Howard Merritt's perspectives, I never mentioned by name the church or pastors. But, of course, it was personal. I attend this church; I count several of the pastors as my friends; and I introduced the moral issue from my church experience. Graciously, the staff took the challenge seriously; they read and shared the perspectives of pastors Callahan and Howard Merritt; we discussed how to address race, violence, and justice not only now, but also in the weeks, months, and years to come. Where there was once silence on Sunday, we have now had powerful moments of prayer. The pastoral staff composed a response letter, which we share here as another feature in these ongoing and vexing problems. For me, their subsequent actions and this letter are more reasons I'm grateful to call this church "my church."

Pastoral response: November 30th was not our best day. But this God we serve has a knack for turning water into wine, resurrecting life from death, and making beautiful that which is mangled. That particular Sunday was the first that followed the decision by the grand jury to not indict officer Darren Wilson in the death of Michael Brown. We overlooked acknowledging this tragic story and the response that was unfolding in Ferguson and, subsequently, around the country. This narrative was gaining momentum as other stories surfaced exposing deep issues of racial violence, mistrust of law enforcement, and inequity. Our staff had talked explicitly about the

need to address this situation and its broader ramifications. We had agreed it would be attended to in the Pastoral Prayer portion of our worship service. And then... it wasn't.

Our service that morning was filled with additional elements: celebrating the first Sunday of Advent, rejoicing with our 3rd-5th graders who had just finished a special Bible program, while also acknowledging a number of parishioners who are journeying through difficult personal and family crises. These items dominated the service and the needs of our people filled the pastoral prayer as we cried out to God on their behalf. We were distracted. We knew it immediately during the service, but no one knew how to integrate the issues erupting in Ferguson in a way that didn't treat it as a side issue or overhaul the entire service. Our staff immediately talked about what we could do next. Do we issue a statement? By mail? Email? Do we wait until the following Sunday?

That Thursday we read Ed's article and were further grieved by our missed opportunity. We felt shame and we felt caught. We had no excuse. The severity of the challenges facing multiple parishioners in our community did not nullify the gravity of this larger story; a wider suffering that must not be forgotten. What impacted me more deeply than the shame of our oversight was the reality that we had the luxury of neglecting the actualities so many others face.

We cannot speak for the white church as a whole, but on behalf of our staff: we blew it. Addressing issues of race in the context of faith communities – especially in predominantly white congregations – can seem daunting to navigate. That is for good reason. The collective issues surrounding racial violence and systemic injustice are indeed intimidating. Compounding this complexity is the general inability for white people to call upon personal experience as a point of understanding. We don't have a framework for an experience so different from our own. Consequently, we must be willing ask people to share their stories with us and allow the pain of those stories to sink in and move us to action.

But these large-scale changes often start in small ways. A friend stood up to his parents for the first time this Thanksgiving. He spoke against the dehumanizing way race was discussed in the conversation over Ferguson, as well as the racial slurs he grew up with that he now refuses to hear. His family meal ended in fighting and defensiveness. Perhaps more meals need to be disrupted as we help pave change and as we find our voices to say, please don't call "*them*," "*them*." Please don't

assume something about a person's life you haven't lived. Please don't use that word for black people around me or, for that matter, ever.

The following Sunday we made a concerted effort to learn from our mistakes. We committed the entirety of the Pastoral Prayer to grieving the multiple accounts of black lives lost and our need to confess that it is too easy for us to marginalize "the other." Our Presbytery and Session recently affirmed [The Belhar Confession](#) and it served as a fitting guide to help set our national story in the broader context of the international realities of racial violence, injustice, and oppression.

Our congregation's response was overwhelmingly positive. A collective longing emerged: people want to dialogue about racial issues, but are stifled by their own uneasiness with initiating such conversations. After the service numerous congregants shared with leadership that they, too, had remained silent when they could have spoken up among family and friends, at work, and in other areas of life. One parishioner shared, *"I have allowed my own insecurity to distance me from the black community's suffering... I don't even know the right terms to use... What is right? What is respectful?"* We were especially thankful for the receptivity of some of our more mature congregants who expressed a deep desire to see these issues addressed. Additionally, it is our hope that in seeking to become a more whole, reconciling community, parishioners will *lovingly* share their expectation that clergy and church leadership continue to address these larger social issues. Silence can no longer be tolerated. Our congregations can help hold us to a higher standard.

Christ came to bring God's kingdom to bear on earth. As people who follow the risen Christ, we cannot faithfully live into his kingdom when we are silent about those who are marginalized in our midst. Our leaders need to curate conversations about race and reconciliation. As people of God we must extend ourselves in risky ways to begin to break down the "other-ness" that exists between races in the larger body of Christ. The Church must be a place that calls people to notice and respond when violence is ignored, when life is devalued, and when the realities people face are minimized. White churches must humbly listen to the stories of people who have lived their lives in an entirely different reality than our own. We must wade into what initially feel like such risky waters because that is what leaders in our congregations must do with regularity about all sorts of issues: step out in humility and faith into unfamiliar territory and see how God might meet us. Christ have mercy.