

After Trayvon Martin case, churches say 'stereotypes cost lives'

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(RNS) An umbrella group of Christian denominations committed to combating racism is urging churches to use the death of Florida teen Trayvon Martin as a "teachable moment" to speak out against racial stereotypes.

"It is a time to understand the burden that some of us have to live always facing the stereotypes of others and the danger that these stereotypes might cost us our lives," wrote the 10 leaders of Churches Uniting in Christ in a statement released Wednesday (March 28).

"In humility, we invite the Body of Christ to join in serious self-examination about how our communities by our silence support racial profiling and stereotyping."

CUIC called on churches to examine laws that may have contributed to the Feb. 26 death of Martin, a 17-year-old African-American who was unarmed.

George Zimmerman, a neighborhood watch volunteer, admitted shooting Martin in Sanford, Fla., but law enforcement officials have not charged him, citing the state's "Stand Your Ground" self-defense law.

"We cannot remain silent as our country once again struggles with the senseless killing of an unarmed young African-American boy," the CUIC leaders said. "We write because we cannot remain silent at the continued 'criminalization' of black and brown peoples with laws that give license to people to shoot first and ask questions later."

CUIC is composed of 10 mainline Protestant and historically black denominations, including the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the Episcopal

Church, the United Methodist Church and others, with a special focus on overcoming racism.

Top leaders of the National Council of Churches also called for the aftermath of Martin's death to be a time for introspection. "All of us -- especially those who are white -- must engage in urgent self-examination about the ways we react to persons we regard as 'other,'" wrote NCC President Kathryn M. Lohre and Interim General Secretary Clare J. Chapman.

Some commentators have questioned whether white clergy took too long to add their voices to discussions about the case.

Although the Florida Council of Churches recently issued a statement about the case, "local white faith leaders have been missing from action in the movement for justice for nearly a month," former Orlando Sentinel religion writer Mark Pinsky wrote in The Huffington Post.