

Ferguson-area churches offer aid after police killing

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In the weeks since the fatal shooting by police of Michael Brown, an unarmed African-American teenager, in Ferguson, Missouri, F. Willis Johnson has led prayer vigils, met with community leaders, and comforted protesters.

Johnson is pastor of Wellspring Church, a predominantly African-American United Methodist congregation, located about a block from the police station in the St. Louis suburb and less than a mile from where most of the protests have been taking place after Brown was shot August 9.

“The ultimate concern is this: under no pretense does someone deserve to lose their life, and in this case to have innocence stripped,” said Johnson, who is the father of a teenage son. “Innocence is not defined by court law but by the fact all life is sacred. In our faith tradition, that is enough to stand on.”

Wellspring Church, in partnership with the Association of Black Psychologists, has provided counseling to anyone in the community who requests it.

Johnson was interviewed by National Public Radio after embracing an 18-year-old blocking traffic at a protest. “It was to affirm him—and to affirm both of us—because in that moment, we were being disaffirmed,” Johnson told NPR. “People who are hurting need to be affirmed in their hurt, people who are angry need to be affirmed in their anger.”

Another local pastor who stood with protesters was Renita Lamkin, an African Methodist Episcopal elder in St. Charles, near Ferguson. She was shot by police with a rubber bullet during the first week of protests, the *Huffington Post* reported.

“We’re not here to fight the police,” Lamkin told *Huff Post*. “We’re here to fight the system.”

Some of the other protesters injured by tear gas and other measures have been given first aid by Greater St. Mark Family Church in St. Louis, a Baptist congregation. Police raided it August 20, according to local and national news reports.

In a video on Instagram, a social media site, a man identified by *Huff Post* as a church organizer said, "County police came out today to this humanitarian shelter, and they've effectively shut it down on a false charge that there were people sleeping in the building, and they're citing occupancy permits. Their information was incorrect."

Traci Blackmon, pastor of Christ the King United Church of Christ in nearby Florissant, hosted a community forum with the Ferguson police chief and mayor three days after the shooting. More than 400 people from different racial backgrounds attended. Blackmon organized the forum after gathering nearly 500 signatures on a petition to the Ferguson police asking them to talk with members of the community.

Also in Florissant, Passage Community Church, together with other local congregations, organized a cleanup in Ferguson after the first few days of protests. Residents joined in when they saw volunteers carrying brooms and large garbage bags, collecting whatever they could find: rubber bullets, broken glass, liquor bottles, tear gas grenades. Joe Costephens, pastor of the Baptist congregation, said that although the trash-collecting effort was a last-minute plan, more than 100 people joined the endeavor.

After working for two hours, nearly 20 people gathered in the parking lot of First Baptist Church in Ferguson and held hands in prayer. They prayed for the family of Michael Brown and for businesses in the area that have been damaged by rioting that occurred amid largely peaceful protests.

"I needed to come out today just to get some stability," said Gary Park, 34, a member of Passage and an auto mechanic who lives near the area in Ferguson where Michael Brown was shot and where protests erupted.

"I wanted some encouragement," he said.

More than 20 clergy from Methodist, Baptist, Lutheran, UCC, and Jewish congregations went August 19 to the neighborhood where Brown lived and died to offer care.

“We, the clergy, in an unstructured way, knocked on doors to say, ‘If you need prayer or counselors, we’re here,’” said Felicia Scott, pastor of St. Jordan’s UCC in Jeffriesburg. —United Methodist News Service, United Church of Christ News, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, added sources