

National clergy issue interracial call for justice

by [Adelle M. Banks](#) and [Anthony Moujaes](#)

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As Barbara Williams-Skinner collected signatures for a statement by leaders of African-American church groups about the Ferguson, Missouri, police shooting of Michael Brown, she found more people wanted to join in.

The general secretary of the National Council of Churches wanted to add his name, along with an Asian-American evangelical leader.

What started out as the “Joint Statement of Heads of Historic African American Church Denominations” has become an interracial cry for justice.

“It’s touching hearts of people who have sons and who know that their sons would not be treated this way,” said Williams-Skinner, cochair of the National African-American Clergy Network, on August 21. “They know it’s wrong. They know it’s wrong before God. And they are responding on a human level.”

The statement, also spearheaded by Otis Moss Jr. and T. DeWitt Smith, veteran civil rights activists, calls on African-American churches to memorialize Michael Brown, the unarmed African-American teen who was shot and killed by a white police officer on August 9. It also urges contributions to a national fund to assist his family with pending legal expenses.

“In light of the long and bloody trail of lynching, deaths, and killings of African-American youth from Emmett Till, to Trayvon Martin, to Michael Brown, and scores of others throughout our nation, we call for action, justice, and the transformation of our society,” the letter reads.

The statement calls for greater voter participation and replacing elected officials with others who “represent the preservation of life in ethnic communities where a disproportionate amount of killings, unsubstantiated sentencing, and jail time are unwarranted means for perpetuating racism and bias against ethnic minorities.”

Other faith groups have weighed in with statements, from the North American leader of the Seventh-day Adventist Church to the World Council of Churches.

Geoffrey A. Black, the United Church of Christ general minister and president, traveled to Ferguson in late August at the invitation of the UCC Missouri Mid-South Conference.

“Two of the clergy I spoke with had moved to St. Louis from other parts of the country,” Black said. “Their shared observation was that when they arrived in St. Louis they realized that it was a ‘powder keg just waiting for a spark in order to explode.’ Their conclusion was that the death of Michael Brown at the hands of a white police officer was the spark.”

He visited the Canfield Green Apartments where Brown was shot, now a rallying place for mourners and protesters.

“It is clear that issues having to do with racial profiling, lack of concern or sensitivity to the real needs of the African-American community, lack of meaningful engagement across racial lines, and lack of political and economic empowerment of the black community in the region are real, significant, and must be addressed,” he said. —RNS, UCC News