

In wake of Ferguson, a bid to make St. Louis a more 'compassionate' city

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ST. LOUIS (RNS) Some might argue that if there is one thing this city could use more of right now, it's compassion.

Even before civil unrest surfaced in the region after Officer Darren Wilson killed Michael Brown in Ferguson, local leaders were trying to find a way to cultivate more of it. But how exactly? And how would we know when we had enough?

Unlike other commodities, compassion is difficult to quantify.

But that hasn't stopped the formation of a worldwide movement for compassionate cities. St. Louis is the latest municipality to vie to be part of the sympathetic pack, which includes Louisville, Ky.; Atlanta; Nashville, Tenn.; Seattle; and other cities from around the world.

On Thursday (November 13), in an effort to bring St. Louis one step closer to officially signing on to what noted religion scholar Karen Armstrong coined as the Charter for Compassion, advocates hosted the first-ever town hall meeting dedicated to the crusade.

"We're wired for compassion and what we would hope for and work toward is compassionate energy and action becoming an increasing factor in decision making and planning across the St. Louis region," said David Mehl of the Interfaith Partnership of Greater St. Louis, a key member of a group of about 30 local leaders pushing that the city, like others around the nation, agree to the charter's terms.

"The situation in Ferguson and beyond makes this all the more relevant."

The charter itself was crafted at Armstrong's behest in 2009 by leading thinkers from the three Abrahamic traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and speaks in

terms eerily relevant to the tense situation Ferguson and surrounding areas face today.

The charter calls for religious and irreligious alike “to honor the inviolable sanctity of every single human being, treating everybody, without exception, with absolute justice, equity and respect,” it says. “To incite hatred by denigrating others—even our enemies—is a denial of our common humanity.”

Or as a newly minted website dedicated to Compassionate St. Louis puts it, the charter inspires “a growing sense that my well-being is directly tied to yours; your pain is my pain; your dreams are mine.”

Carla Mae Streeter, professor emerita of the Aquinas Institute of Theology, says the region is currently “overlooking people who just want to be visible,” who are left wondering, “Do you even see me?”

“We see this as a vital step to help heal the unconscious and conscious racism that infects this country,” Streeter said. “Laws do not change hearts and minds. We see this as having a direct social impact.”

Andrew Himes, founding executive director for Charter for Compassion International, says more than 60 cities have signed the charter and that more than 350 are in the process of joining. In addition, more than 100,000 individuals have agreed to the charter’s conditions.

“It’s kind of astonishing to see the very sudden growth of this movement for compassion,” Himes said.

Armstrong, who has written about what many of the world’s faith traditions have in common, was in 2008 awarded \$100,000 by TED, a nonprofit devoted to spreading ideas through short, powerful talks. She used the award to launch the Charter for Compassion.

In her book *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*, Armstrong writes that “all faiths insist that compassion is the test of true spirituality ... each has formulated its own version of what is sometimes called the Golden Rule, ‘Do not treat others as you would not like them to treat you,’ or in its positive form, ‘Always treat others as you would wish to be treated yourself.’”