Marching into danger: Fear and hope in Ferguson

by Shannon Craigo-Snell in the October 1, 2014 issue

I was walking with a group of clergy in Ferguson, Missouri, singing, “We Shall Overcome.” As we finished the verse that says, “We are not afraid today,” I turned to the person next to me and whispered, “That’s a lie. I am afraid.”

I knew that we would encounter the police at some point in the evening, but nothing prepared me for the sheer number of officers. We had gathered at dinnertime in the parking lot of a grocery store miles away from the protest site. By the time there were four of us, there were also four squad cars of officers telling us to leave.

We drove to the local high school, parked our cars, and began walking to the county prosecutor’s office in Clayton to present a letter with a list of demands, including an expedited grand jury process and the recusal of county prosecutor Bob McCulloch. Although we were far from the site of Michael Brown’s death, our route was guarded by scores of heavily armed officers. Squad cars drove slowly beside us, and there were SWAT teams and barricades.

We were not being guarded in the sense of being protected but guarded against, as if we were an extreme threat. As a white Presbyterian woman, I had never experienced being policed in this way. It was unnerving. Could a couple hundred clergy walking together really pose such a threat? We prayed together, then delivered our list of demands to an officer. It was a single sheet of paper wilting in the humid heat, but the officer acted as if it might explode and hesitated to even take hold of it.

In Ferguson we gathered in a church that is home base and sanctuary for the protesters. One folding table held a jumble of first-aid supplies. The other held makeshift gear: bottles of water, spray bottles of solution for washing tear gas out of eyes, paper masks, and swim goggles for eye protection.

The leaders are a group of twenty-somethings thoughtfully engaging in nonviolent protests. They wanted us to know what we would encounter on the march. They told us not to make any sudden movements. If we carried a water bottle, we should hold it up high so the police could see what it was. If we took gear (a mask or goggles), we should not let it be seen until it was needed, or we would be targeted. They were protective of us newbies; one of the young men asked me if I had a group to walk with. He did not want me to go out alone.

Then these young protesters—I kid you not—prepared to face hundreds of heavily armed officers by reciting poetry. Those leaders were the fiercest hope I have ever seen. I was humbled by such hope, amazed by it, and protective of these young people who embodied it.

The clergy were divided into teams with a trained organizer for each team. We memorized each other's names, agreed to be responsible for one another, and wrote an emergency number on our skin with a purple Sharpie. Our team captain asked us what level of danger and violence we were willing to face. Would we leave when the tear gas started? I asked: Why we would willingly walk into tear gas? He said: "To get the young people out. They will keep going, so some of us go back in to pull them out."

When we reached the protest area the street was closed to traffic and the parking lots were filled with media people and hundreds of police officers. We were allowed to protest as long as we stayed on the sidewalk, kept moving, and did nothing that could be interpreted as aggression. At one point a kindly officer gave us a minute before asking us to move along. "If I make an exception for you," he said, "I have to make an exception for everybody." The clear implication was that he would let us stop if he could. I was torn between enjoying his favor and realizing that it was this distinction that I was there to protest. Did we seem harmless because of our clergy collars or because some of us were white?

We marched, sang, and did call-and-response chants—"Hands up! Don't shoot!" For me the most powerful chant was the call-and-response "Who's in charge?" "God's in

charge!” The clergy present that night represented a diverse assortment of faiths and no doubt held very different views of who God is and what it means for God to be “in charge.” Yet in this moment we could agree. We could counter the false claim to authority made by military-grade weaponry. We could stand against the pernicious falsehood that black life matters less than white life.

As the night wore on, my fear deepened. Every night so far the police had responded with tear gas, flash grenades, or rubber bullets. What would it be tonight? We passed one person who seemed intoxicated and another who appeared to be mentally ill. Most marchers were peaceful, but it would take only one wrong move to set off the officers. After 11 p.m., the police held yellow sticks as well as guns. Sticks aren’t as dangerous as guns, but they made me nervous.

At this point a young black man came by and said, “Are you a group? Can I walk with you?” I’m not proud of my reaction: I didn’t want him to walk with us. He had his red T-shirt pulled up over his head, so he was effectively masked. A number of the protesters did this, and I suspected it was makeshift protection from tear gas. I didn’t want him walking next to me because I was afraid his presence would spark a violent response.

Then the man turned, and I saw on his torso a phone number scrawled in purple Sharpie—he was one of the youth from the church, one of the young leaders that I’d been eager to protect. I had gone from hoping that my clergy stole would protect this young man to not wanting him near me, since I did not want the protection of my stole, and my white skin and gray hair, to be disrupted by his presence. Hope in the church turned to fear on the street so quickly.

Hope is always frightening. It opens us to disappointment. Hope is frightening in another way for those of us who are privileged in the current state of affairs. I want a better world but am afraid to give up the security I have in this one. Hope threatens me, even in its abundant promise. For me, part of the challenge is not to fear hope itself.