

Police chief to black churches: 'We can't do this without you guys'

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January 19, 2015

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(RNS) Bishop Talbert W. Swan II has worked with police departments in western Massachusetts for two decades, speaking to new cadets and riding in patrol cars with officers as their chaplain.

He sometimes coordinates meetings at his church with witnesses to crimes who didn't want to visit a police station, but says only "pockets of the religious community" have fostered that kind of regular communication with law enforcement.

"The unfortunate reality is that many predominantly black churches have thrown up their hands and decided that the police departments just are not willing to respect communities of color and so they've given up," said Swan, pastor of Spring of Hope Church of God in Christ in Springfield and an adviser for social justice policy in the predominantly black denomination. "And then there are many predominantly white churches who don't see a problem. Therefore, they see no reason to work with the police."

Churches have offered themselves up as trusted go-betweens for the police and angry residents, particularly in black communities as racial tensions continue to simmer in the wake of the deaths of unarmed black men at the hands of white officers in Ferguson, Missouri; New York City; and elsewhere.

Yet as the new movie *Selma* focuses on the harsh treatment that police meted out on civil rights activists 50 years ago, clergy and police say there is still much work to be done. Black pastors, especially, find themselves in the uneasy spot of giving voice to the rage in the pews while also trying to work as honest brokers with police.

"There's tremendous similarity between what was happening in Selma and what's happening in Ferguson," said Traci Blackmon, pastor of Christ the King United

Church of Christ in nearby Florissant, Missouri, who joined protests against police brutality in the wake of a grand jury decision not to charge the white officer who shot and killed Michael Brown.

Blackmon has seen both sides of the church-cop relationship in suburban St. Louis. Two years ago, a police officer friend helped her track down a missing 14-year-old when others told her there was nothing they could do. In December, her church joined two other predominantly black congregations to distribute toys to poor children alongside police officers and members of the St. Louis Cardinals baseball team.

“At least from the churches’ standpoint, it’s never been an attack on all police,” she said. “This is more, for the church, about a response to a system of repression.”

After months of exacerbated racial tensions, black clergy and police officials say bridge-building between the people in uniform and those in the pews is needed now more than ever.

In South Los Angeles, LAPD Inspector General Alexander Bustamante began meeting with clergy and lay leaders of the African Methodist Episcopal Church last year. Soon, he hopes to meet with Catholic leaders to build inroads to Latino communities.

“The idea is to try to team up to educate their constituents and to make sure that they know that they have recourse if they believe the officers have been performing misconduct,” he said.

From coast to coast, clergy and cops say personal relationships are the key to improving police-community interactions. As the Ferguson protests rippled across the country last fall, Tony Lee gathered police officers and former inmates at his Community of Hope AME Church in Hillcrest Heights, Maryland.

Even as he supported Al Sharpton’s national protests against police brutality, Lee wanted to highlight the positive local relationship his church has with the Prince George’s County Police Department.

“They literally have sat down with young brothers and sisters who have records or who have had major issues with the department,” Lee said.

In nearby Baltimore, Jamal-Harrison Bryant, pastor of the Empowerment Temple, gathered hundreds of youth and police at a town hall meeting about what to

do during a police stop.

“I had lawyers, public defenders, parents to try to bridge that gap of communication,” said Bryant, who was recently appointed to a city task force to consider use of body cameras by police officers.

On the Sunday before the upcoming Martin Luther King Day holiday, some black churches are calling for a “walk out” to make their presence visible in local communities. But David Isom of Fairfield, California, is taking a different approach.

His St. Stephen Christian Methodist Episcopal Church will delay its morning service to meet members of a mostly white church in a unity walk that will end at the local Police Activities League center.

Isom, joining with other ministers and the former police chief, co-founded the group Faith Partners Against Crime that mentors local youth and gives them PAL scholarships.

“I am concerned about what has happened to African-American lives—period,” Isom said. “But I don’t think that all police are bad, and I don’t think that all kids are angels.”

The current police chief in Fairfield said work with churches has improved the community and helped establish a Public Safety Academy in the local school district. He praised the “moment of blessing” ceremonies initiated by Isom at local crime sites, where clergy, police and families of victims come together.

“It has helped with putting a personal face on those that are involved in this and that are going to support a family through the process,” said Fairfield Police Chief Walter Tibbet.

Kenton Rainey, the police chief of the Bay Area Rapid Transit system, who helped found the Faith PAC in Fairfield, said black ministers were among the first groups he approached when he started his new job in 2010. He said it was important to gain their trust before a crisis.

His message to them was simple: “We can’t do this without you guys.”