

To Ferguson and beyond

by [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

September 3, 2014

In the past few weeks, we have been thinking about Michael Brown, the unarmed teenager who was shot by the police. My husband, Brian Merritt, traveled to Ferguson, Missouri to [join other Presbyterian ministers](#) to listen and pray with people. We have been grieving Brown's loss, holding vigils, and praying for peace and justice.

As we know, the shooting of Michael Brown was not just one incident, in one town. The reason that the fear and concern grew was because it was that proverbial straw that broke the camel's back. It was the outcry of people who have been living under a system that has targeted young black men.

So what can we do about it? First, if you're not familiar with Michelle Alexander's work, go ahead and get a copy of [The New Jim Crow](#). If you know yourself well, and you realize that you have good intentions, but you also have a really busy schedule, and you have that sinking feeling that the book will probably sit on your shelf collecting dust, then watch this video. It's long—over an hour long. It's also very compelling.

If you're thinking that this is sad, but you're wondering what all of this has to do with us, as Christian leaders, then go ahead and get a copy of [The Cross and the Lynching Tree](#). James Cone will explain why these issues are intimately bound with our faith.

Once you have been convinced, where do we go from here? What are some things that we can do after the Twitter slacktivism has moved on to its next hashtag outcry? How can we make some sort of meaningful impact?

Clarify our goals. Any systemic issue with hundreds of years of history is going to be very complex. But can we focus on a couple of goals? I am by no means an expert in these matters. I wrote a little bit about them in [Fighting for Peace](#). But from

what I can tell, there are a few glaring issues.

We can stop the targeting of black neighborhoods and black men by local police. Let me give you an example of how this happens. In Chattanooga, across from Renaissance Presbyterian Church, there is a park where many people in the housing projects hang out. In fact, Renaissance donated the green space to the neighborhood. [Mercy Junction](#) was planning to plant some community gardens there. Then, when the protests in Ferguson broke out, “No Trespassing” signs appeared around the park along with several police cars to arrest those who step on the land.

Fight the privatization of our prisons. Prisons have become a big business in our country, and like all businesses, they need customers. This (among other things) has resulted in a staggering upturn in incarceration.

Change the “tough on crime” laws that cut felons off from society. People who have been convicted of nonviolent felonies do not have access to food stamps, employment, housing, or educational grants. It’s hard to become a productive member of society if you can’t get food, jobs, shelter, or education. Often, this lack of resources forces young men into criminal activity.

Focus on education and economic growth in underserved neighborhoods. We know what it takes to develop our neighborhood—low-interest loans, arts development, business incentives and good schools. In underserved areas, people have been cut off from those necessary resources. ([Here](#) is another Barna Frames resource that talks about the inequities in education.) Many of our highway systems were built so that they can bypass diverse neighborhoods cut people of color off from economic opportunity.

These are big goals, but they’re not impossible, if we work on a grass-roots level. How do we do it?

Find out your denominational statements. When I was in D.C., most people were aware of issues and ready to roll up their sleeves to do something about it. For the most part, it was their job to do so. But now that I’m working among churches in the South, in a much more conservative area, I find that denominational statements are really helpful. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) looks at Ferguson through the

issues of [racism and gun violence](#).

Talk to your churches. Have educational opportunities that focus on these issues and make them local. Preach on them. Understand how all of this playing out in your town and neighborhood. Draw a map of your town, and have people locate different parts of it. How do we identify them?

Show up and get involved. I have white pastors tell me, “Well, this really isn’t my issue.” But white pastors can show up. Really. It's the least we can do. Moral Mondays, vigils, prayer groups—find out what’s going on in your town, put on your collar, and be there to support your brothers and sisters. I don't like the way this works, but people notice when a white pastor is in the crowd, and for the white community, it suddenly becomes an issue for all of us.