

Louisville faith leaders after Breonna Taylor decision: 'Our cries have fallen on deaf ears'

by [Rich Copley](#) in the [October 21, 2020](#) issue



J. Herbert Nelson II, stated clerk of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), at a rally for racial justice in Breonna Square on August 19. (Presbyterian News Service / Rich Copley)

Leaders of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) called the September 23 decision of a Louisville grand jury to indict only one officer involved in the death of Breonna Taylor on three counts of wanton endangerment “a travesty.”

“Our hearts break today upon the news that a grand jury will not seek stronger charges against the police officers involved in the shooting death of Breonna Taylor in Louisville, Kentucky,” said a statement signed by officials in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) national offices, located in Louisville, and the Mid-Kentucky Presbytery, which includes Louisville.

“The senseless death of this young woman has enraged this community and prompted thousands, including many Presbyterians, to take to the streets to call for justice in the last several months. And yet, today’s news of only three charges of Wanton Endangerment only makes us feel that our cries have fallen on deaf ears.”

Taylor, who was Black, was killed on the night of March 13 when three Louisville Metro Police Department officers served a warrant at Taylor’s apartment. In an exchange of gunfire with Taylor’s boyfriend, Kenneth Walker, Taylor was shot six times and died from one of the gunshots. Walker, a licensed gun owner, said he fired believing the officers were intruders.

Kentucky attorney general Daniel Cameron said the warrant was a “knock and announce” warrant and that an independent civilian witness verified that the officers did announce themselves. Walker has maintained he did not hear the officers identify themselves.

The grand jury indicted Brett Hankison, who was fired from the LMPD on June 23, with three counts of wanton endangerment for the shots he fired outside Taylor’s apartment. He faces up to five years in prison on each count if found guilty.

No charges were returned against Myles Cosgrove, who fired the fatal shot, or the other officers who fired inside the apartment. Cameron said they were justified in their use of force in the incident “because they were fired upon.”

On September 15, the City of Louisville agreed to pay \$12 million and institute a series of police reforms in response to a wrongful death lawsuit brought by Taylor’s family.

Hundreds of protesters took to the streets in Louisville following the grand jury decision, some of them using First Unitarian Church—which, as a house of worship, had been exempted from the citywide curfew—as a sanctuary from the police.

“This is what churches are supposed to be,” Dawn Cooley, justice coordinator at the Thomas Jefferson Unitarian Church Justice Center, told local media. “They’re supposed to be sanctuaries and havens for people who are in need. So this is absolutely what all the churches should be doing,” she said.

The night after the grand jury decision, police officers circled the church and arrested people trying to take refuge there.

Twenty-four people were arrested that night in Louisville, including state representative Attica Scott—the only Black woman in the Kentucky state legislature and the sponsor of Breonna’s Law, which would require a judge to approve the use of violent entry when issuing a warrant and for police officers to activate their body cameras when serving the warrant.

The PCUSA Mid-Kentucky Presbytery held a vigil for Taylor on September 27.

“The City of Louisville is broken, hurting, angry and afraid,” said general presbyter John Odom. “Together as a community in prayer, we call on and witness to the one from whom our help comes, and we recommit ourselves to God’s work of justice, truth, and reconciliation.” —Presbyterian News Service, Dawn Araujo-Hawkins