

Tyre Nichols police beating video prompts faith leaders to react with grief, goals

by [Adelle M. Banks](#)

January 30, 2023



An image of Tyre Nichols is projected onto a building as demonstrators protest on January 27 in Washington. (AP Photo/Carolyn Kaster)

Religious leaders reacted swiftly—with legislative appeals and collective grief—to the release of video footage of police officers beating Tyre Nichols, a Black man who died days after a traffic stop in Memphis, Tennessee.

Church of God in Christ Presiding Bishop J. Drew Sheard, whose historically Black denomination has its headquarters in Memphis, issued a statement on January 27 addressing the “shocking death” of Nichols, a 29-year-old FedEx worker who died on January 10 in a local hospital.

“We understand the frustration and outrage of citizens at the brutal nature of the death of yet another Black man by those committed to serve and protect,” Sheard said in [comments released in writing and via video](#). “Our heartfelt condolences and prayers go out to his family and friends during this difficult time.”

He said his denomination commends the police department’s quick termination of officers involved in the beating and the “appropriate charges” filed against them.

“We unequivocally applaud the daily commitment of most police officers and appreciate their willingness to put their lives on the line,” Sheard added. “However, we cannot ignore that many individuals have experienced unjust targeting, humiliation, loss of physical freedom, physical harm, and even death at the hands of relatively few officers.”

Other faith leaders expressed grief and offered prayers for Nichols’ family, as well as called for national and state legislation. Some questioned whether the video of the police beating of Nichols should be watched.

Episcopal Church Presiding Bishop Michael Curry grieved that there was “not one Good Samaritan” who would immediately offer medical assistance to a severely wounded Nichols but expressed appreciation for those who have protested peacefully and continue to seek the “justice for all” proclaimed in the Pledge of Allegiance.

“While we grieve, we cannot give in or give up,” Curry said in a statement. “Just throwing up our hands in despair is not an option lest we leave a brother, a sister, a sibling on the side of the road again. No, let more Good Samaritans arise so that Tyre Nichols’ death will not be in vain.”

Southern Baptist Convention President Bart Barber, who said his “heart goes out to the Nichols family,” wrote a thread of comments on Twitter urging Christians “filled with the fruit of the Spirit” to consider entering police forces.

“If law enforcement is God’s calling upon your life but your heart overflows with compassion for someone crying out to his mother while being beaten to death, embrace that calling while maintaining that compassion,” he said. “You can make a difference.”

Al Sharpton, who is scheduled to eulogize Nichols on Wednesday, expressed gratitude for the Justice Department's opening of a civil rights investigation after Nichols' death.

"The sad reality is police brutality will be an ever-present threat for Black and Brown Americans unless cops continually see that those who use blunt force will go to jail," Sharpton, president of the National Action Network, said in a statement. "They need to understand that a badge isn't a shield that lets them kill someone during a traffic stop. And the only way to do that is through convictions and legislation."

Progressive National Baptist Convention President David Peoples criticized the "rabid disregard for human life and the sheer abuse of public trust" by the five officers depicted in the video.

"The culture of policing in America is violent, unaccountable, and anti-Black, even when it involves Black police officers," he said. "This is a grueling fact from Memphis to Manhattan, Ferguson to Fort Worth."

The police officers involved in the beating of Nichols were Black.

Peoples said his denomination wants Congress to pass the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act and state legislators to adopt similar laws.

President Joe Biden, in a Friday statement, also cited the George Floyd legislation that would hold law enforcement officers accountable for their actions.

"That is why I called on Congress to send the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act to my desk," the president said. "When they didn't, I signed an executive order that included stricter use of force standards and accountability provisions for federal law enforcement, as well as measures to strengthen accountability at the state and local level."

Catholics for Choice President Jamie L. Manson responded to the video by pointing out the loss of Nichols's life in Tennessee, which its governor, Ted Lee, has called "one of the most pro-life states in America."

"But Black Lives Matter is a pro-life issue—and a place where Black and Brown folks are not safe in the hands of law enforcement cannot honestly call itself 'pro-life,'" Manson said.

Still others, echoing the decision of Nichols's mother, RowVaughn Wells, to not watch most of the video, questioned the wisdom of releasing and watching the latest video of brutal treatment of a Black person.

"Yes, the public has asked for it, the family deserved to know the truth, the officials will applaud themselves for being transparent, media outlets will get 'breaking news' cred, but how many times must we engage in the voyeurism of violence against Black lives?" tweeted Cassandra Gould, senior faith strategist with Faith in Action, a multifaith group that often advocates for liberal-leaning causes.

Vashti McKenzie, interim president of the National Council of Churches and a retired spiritual leader of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, recommended an alternative to watching the beating of Nichols: a [video statement](#) from American Psychological Association President Thema Bryant, also an AME minister, who advised thinking about Nichols's life, seeking self-care, and taking collective action.

"It's important in moments like this when there is trauma and violence for us to be aware of the realities of vicarious trauma and collective trauma," Bryant said. "So even if you did not know him personally, you may feel the effects of his death. We want to consider, in times of violence, the importance of us taking sacred pause, collective pause to check in with ourselves."

On Sunday at [Destiny World Church](#) in the Atlanta suburb of Austell, Pastor Wilbur T. Purvis III called on the men at his predominantly Black church to stand around the perimeter of the sanctuary and recite the words of a "Brotherhood Creed" after him that included "I am my Brother's Keeper! . . . Brother, I call a truce, a truce on violence, a truce on old grudges, a truce on past offenses. I let it go. Whatever it is, it's done. I'm done with it. It's over. Let's build together."

More than 100 men and boys joined in repeating the creed after Purvis, as an image of Nichols was shown on a screen at the front of the church.

In a statement, Purvis added his reaction to the video showing Black police officers' harsh treatment of another Black man.

"The Memphis incident was shameful," said Pastor Purvis. "It's one thing to lose a brother to the brutality of the police; it's worse in this scenario because it was a brother killing a brother. . . . At some point we have to get over our self-hatred."

—Religion News Service