



# IN THE NEWS

from [www.TheThoughtfulChristian.com](http://www.TheThoughtfulChristian.com)

FEATURED: SEPTEMBER 2014

## In the News: Does Ferguson Reflect America?

### What Happened?

The situation in Ferguson, Missouri, was spurred by the killing of eighteen-year-old Michael Brown on August 9, 2014. Following are facts about this killing and the events that happened afterward.

- Michael Brown and his friend Dorian Johnson were involved in some sort of encounter with Officer Darren Wilson just after noon on August 9.<sup>1</sup> He was not stopped because he was a suspect in a crime, although for a short time police officials falsely implied that this was the case.
- Wilson shot Brown at least six times. An autopsy released by Brown's family indicates the bullets entered the front of his body (meaning he was facing Wilson). Two were shots to the head, with the most likely fatal bullet indicating he was looking down when it hit him. A range of witnesses report that at least one shot was fired as Brown was running away from Wilson. Construction workers in the area concur with Brown's friends who witnessed the killing, everyone agreeing that he did not "bull charge" Wilson (as police claim) after turning to face Wilson. Their descriptions range from Brown stumbling forward because he'd been shot or walking slowly toward Wilson after having already been hit with his hands in the air pleading, "Okay, okay."<sup>2</sup>
- Johnson claims Brown's hands were over his head when he was killed.
- Brown was unarmed.
- Brown's body lay in the street for four hours after the killing, traumatizing area residents who could see his body lying face down in pools of blood under a hot sun from the windows of their homes.<sup>3</sup>
- On August 10 residents held a candlelight vigil at the site of Brown's death. When it was over, they began to walk and chant, "No Justice. No Peace." Police officers were present, holding rifles and dressed in heavy riot gear.
- Chaos erupted from this point and continued for many days thereafter.
- For at least twelve days, protests, violence, tear gas, tanks, and other signs of civic disorder marked life in Ferguson. By August 11 the FBI had opened an investigation into Brown's killing. Criticism of the way St. Louis County Police was handling protestors led to the Missouri State Patrol taking over crowd policing on August 14. On the sixteenth the governor declared a state of emergency, imposed a midnight curfew, and, two days later, deployed the National

In the News studies are free to all registered users of The Thoughtful Christian. Copyright © 2014 [www.TheThoughtfulChristian.com](http://www.TheThoughtfulChristian.com).

Guard in a continuing attempt to instill calm. Schools remained closed a week past their scheduled start date of August 20.

- Protestors made several demands throughout the crisis. An early demand was the release of Officer Wilson’s name, which the police department withheld for six days before agreeing to publicly identify Wilson. On August 18 the Organization for Black Struggle—the organizers at the heart of the protests—released a list of local demands, which included the arrest of Wilson (who as of this writing remains free), de-escalation of the militarization of the police, and protection of protestors’ constitutional right to peaceful protest. Their national demands include a call for the Department of Justice to initiate an investigation into the systemic and widespread presence of public brutality and harassment in “black and brown communities.”<sup>4</sup>
- On August 25, the day Michael Brown was to have started college, thousands attended his funeral. Relatives of other men who have died at the hands of police attended, as did three White House officials and family members of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

## The Painful Bigger Picture

Consider the thoughts echoing in your mind as you read the list of what is known. Do they sound like any of the following?

“Let’s slow down until we have *all* the facts.”

“Oh dear God, no. Yet *another* one of our children.”

“This is a horrible and tragic *accident*.”

“Officer Wilson *deserves* the benefit of ‘innocent until proven guilty.’”

“This is devastating for *everyone* involved.”

Such reactions constituted the public debate that ensued in those first weeks of August. And whether or not they were spoken aloud, these thoughts were surely present within our congregations as well.

But the reality is that deep chasms exist between such diverse reactions. Each of these responses frames, and thus explains, Brown’s death in a radically different way. And that difference is indicative of a deep interracial alienation still characterizing this country that Ferguson brutally exposed.

## Enough!

Events in Ferguson took shape as they did because the African American community there experienced something that wasn’t new. Their grief and rage were not the kind that emerge when a community is surprised by a horrific tragedy. It was the sort of reaction that erupts when a community is anything but surprised and is weary with the knowledge that such tragedies keep happening. Eventually the community publicly responds with a loud, “Enough!”

This response came, in part, because interracial tensions simmer and build barely beneath the surface in any community in which the population is 70 percent black and the police force is 95 percent white.<sup>5</sup> Few of Ferguson’s officers actually live in the community. Without active and intentional work to prevent it, such demographics lead to a dangerous climate. Those with significant and intimidating power over residents’ lives have little stake in cultivating meaningful community relations with a population they are inclined to see as distinct from themselves in so many ways.

## Unfair Representation and Sentencing

It’s not a new idea that demographic imbalance between a police force and the citizens it’s supposed to serve is a setup for disaster. In fact, to that end it’s worth noticing that when State

Patrol Captain Ronald S. Johnson was brought in to take over on August 14, much was made of the fact that he was not only black but also from Ferguson.<sup>6</sup> These realities, along with Johnson's decision to himself talk and walk with protestors and to require officers to remove their riot gear, were widely credited with having an immediate—though, ultimately short-lived—calming effect.

Systemic local realities surely contributed as well to the Ferguson crisis. A *Washington Post* investigative report released in early September opens with the account of a thirty-two-year-old mother of two pulled over for an illegal U-turn only to end up in prison for two weeks because of outstanding warrants for unpaid traffic tickets.<sup>7</sup> This woman was African American. She was also simply too poor to pay her previous tickets.

The report continues with data revealing this woman's story to be anything but unique. Numerous towns in St. Louis County actually have more arrest warrants on file than they do residents living there (in other words, there are mul-

... when African Americans encounter police, whatever the reason, they are three times more likely to end up dead than are white Americans.

iple arrest warrants per resident). The title "How Municipalities in St. Louis County, Mo., Profit from Poverty" sums up what this jaw-dropping, carefully documented investigation reveals: a place in which outrageous fines for violations as minor as a broken tail light are the norm leads to black citizens being jailed in astronomical numbers.

## A Reflection of a National Problem

But understanding Ferguson requires placing it in a larger national context too. Less than three weeks before Brown was killed, a horrifying video

of Staten Island police killing Eric Garner went viral. Police officers in Ohio shot and killed John Crawford III in a Walmart the same week Brown died, while Crawford stood holding a toy rifle he had picked up in the store's toy section. Attorneys in the case claim that the video of Crawford's death shows him leaning casually on the toy while talking on his phone with his back to officers. When officers yelled, he turned to look and his last words were, "It's not real! It's not real!"<sup>8</sup>

African Americans are killed by police officers once every three to four days in the United States. According to the FBI, in 44 percent of these cases the person killed is unarmed.<sup>9</sup> The stark reality of the data is this: when African Americans encounter police, whatever the reason, they are three times more likely to end up dead than are white Americans.<sup>10</sup>

Justice never seems to come in these cases. Ferguson's uproar was fueled by the expectation of African Americans—resting on vast prior experience—that those who kill black youth will not be

held accountable. The same summer Trayvon Martin's killer walked free, Jonathan Ferrell was injured in North Carolina in a car accident so horrific he only escaped by climbing out the back window. Walking a half-mile through darkness, Ferrell

knocked on a door seeking help. The homeowner called 911. When police arrived, one of them shot him dead.<sup>11</sup> At the time the police department released a statement calling the shooting an unjustified and excessive use of force. Yet on August 26, seventeen days after Brown's death, a grand jury failed to indict the officer who killed Ferrell.

Whether we find these accounts almost too outrageous to believe or find it outrageous that anyone could fail to believe these accounts, we are directly illustrating the racial alienation exposed in Ferguson.

The hard reality is that white Americans do not live in, with, or under the policing system that black Americans do. Segregation in housing, education, and the workplace remains so deep that most whites don't even know, let alone know well, anyone who lives in, with, or under the kind of system these accounts describe. A recent study found that the social networks in which white Americans live are 91 percent white.<sup>12</sup>

Most white people can safely teach their children that police officers are safe people to be sought out if a child is in trouble. It is no surprise they are more likely to see Brown's death as a tragic accident and even to look for some explanation (i.e., Brown must have done *something*) that makes sense of Officer Wilson's deadly violence.<sup>13</sup>

On the other hand, most black parents must teach their sons what to carefully do when stopped by police. And black sons *will* be stopped at some point. For them, "waiting for the facts" or "a tragic accident" sounds like anything but a neutral response to Brown's killing. It sounds like another layer of denial about the actual day-to-day experience of African Americans, a denial that leads to more deaths.

One week after Brown's death a Pew poll revealed that 80 percent of blacks said the case exposes important issues about the state of race in this country. Only 37 percent of whites agreed.<sup>14</sup>

The difficult truth is that Brown's killing and racially polarized reactions to it are part of the same problem. We live in racial worlds that are still so very far apart. The cost to those whose daily experiences remain unseen by the demographic majority of citizens and decision makers is great.

Acknowledging this painful reality and the violence it spawned again this August in Ferguson helps us begin to know where and how we Christians must respond.

## Churches Respond

Despite the despair-filled images coming out of Ferguson, there was and continues to be hope.

One source of hope was the presence of Christians from different racial groups, local and out-of-state, who showed up to bear witness not just to love but to justice.

Local pastor Willis Johnson of Wellspring United Methodist Church heard a crowd chanting outside his window the day Brown was killed. When he went outside and heard talk of walking over to the police station, he encouraged the crowd to wait. Then he walked to the police himself and got officials to come out to the crowd instead.<sup>15</sup>

Churches like Wellspring quickly set up sanctuaries of aid and support. Throughout Ferguson they became places for people to eat, children to play (as schools remained closed), and neighbors to connect, strategize, and grieve.

During the most active days of the protests, clergy played other roles as well. Some simply showed up and ministered by listening to an angry, grieving people. Bishop Timothy Woods said that, as someone able to empathize with the experience of blacks in Ferguson, he knew simply humanizing their pain was critical.<sup>16</sup> Other reports surfaced of clergy actively mediating between armed and angry police and outraged and agitated protestors in an attempt to reduce the likelihood of more violence. The Rev. Renita Lamkin, an African Methodist Episcopal minister, was standing calmly trying to do just that when she was shot with a rubber bullet and severely injured.<sup>17</sup>

On the night of August 21, one hundred clergy wearing bright orange shirts that read "Clergy United" could be seen walking with protestors at midnight. Describing her decision to be present, the Rev. Julie Taylor, a Unitarian Universalist clergy from a neighboring community, claimed that the increasing numbers of clergy had undoubtedly helped reduce tensions and saved lives.<sup>18</sup>

In perhaps a more surprising role, Christians also helped disseminate information about what

was actually happening in Ferguson. Heather Wilson, a former Sojourners intern, reported on her participation in a peaceful procession two hours before curfew on August 18. She described how police officers arrived in armored cars, yelled at crowds that had been calm until their arrival, and then opened fire with tear gas with no provocation. The crowd included children. Wilson charged Ferguson police with lying when they reported that Molotov cocktails thrown by protestors had justified their use of tear gas.<sup>19</sup>

While the wave of violence that washed over Ferguson for days has simmered down for now, Christians remain active even while many hold their breath in anticipation of what might come in the wake of a grand jury decision. For example, a “Teach-in and Preach-in Tent Revival for Social Justice: For Such a Time as This” has been organized for mid-September, drawing clergy from across the nation. The commitment here is to continue to bring people of faith together to carve a path away from systemic oppression and violence and toward justice.

## What Can Non-Ferguson Christians Do?

Most of us will not go bear witness in Ferguson. But there are many other things Christians can do to strive for the justice and love that lay at the heart of the gospel.

- We must talk about Ferguson in our congregations. We must pray about it in worship and create forums for education and dialogue. The racial alienation laid bare in August may make this work difficult. But it is work we can and must be about if we want a different future together.
- Those of us who are Christian and have not learned before now about the systemic

and racialized police realities so many communities live with must begin to do so. Realizing we have diverse perceptions of Ferguson because of our different experiences is not the same thing as saying every interpretation of what happened there is equally accurate or valid. If my sibling has an experience that I know nothing about but that impacts her day-to-day living, siblinghood means listening and learning. We

**Ferguson’s uproar was fueled by the expectation of African Americans—resting on vast prior experience—that those who kill black youth will not be held accountable.**

must learn to not separate Michael Brown’s death from the other deaths named above and help others stop doing the same. We must come to understand why calling killings tragic accidents or isolated incidents names them in ways that leave us unable and unwilling to work to reduce the likelihood of another killing next week.

- Very concrete actions we can take include supporting the Organization for Black Struggle (OBS, [www.obs-ontheforce.org](http://www.obs-ontheforce.org)) and the faith communities working with it in Ferguson. Ferguson leaders will continue to monitor Wilson’s prosecution—as of this writing, the grand jury was already hearing testimony. Congregations might respond to calls for public expressions of solidarity that OBS will surely continue to request in their efforts to keep the case in the national spotlight. They can collect financial love offerings to support the work of those responding to the direct needs of Ferguson residents affected by this crisis.<sup>20</sup>

- And of course, we can and we need to look around our own communities, towns, and cities and ask what's going on with policing at home. Are groups already working to build better relationships between police and black and brown communities? How can our congregations support them?

The challenges are real. The journey will be long. But following Jesus means taking the risk of stepping out and stepping up in a variety of ways so that all our youth know not only that they are

beloved but also that they can expect to be treated as beloved.

---

*Jennifer Harvey is Associate Professor of Religion and Ethics at Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa. She is the author of Dear White Christians: For Those Still Longing for Racial Reconciliation and Whiteness and Morality: Pursuing Racial Justice through Reparations and Sovereignty. She blogs regularly at formations. living at the intersections of self, social, spirit, which can be found at <http://livingformations.com>.*

## Endnotes

1. See "Tracking the Events in the Wake of Michael Brown's Shooting," <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/08/12/us/13police-shooting-of-black-teenager-michael-brown.html>.
2. Jeremy Kohler, "Workers Who Were Witnesses Provide New Perspective on Michael Brown Shooting," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, Sept. 7, 2014, [http://m.stltoday.com/news/local/crime-and-courts/workers-who-were-witnesses-provide-new-perspective-on-michael-brown/article\\_14a3e5f8-6c6a-5deb-92fe-87fcee622c29.html?mobile\\_touch=true](http://m.stltoday.com/news/local/crime-and-courts/workers-who-were-witnesses-provide-new-perspective-on-michael-brown/article_14a3e5f8-6c6a-5deb-92fe-87fcee622c29.html?mobile_touch=true).
3. Julie Bosman and Joseph Goldstein, "Timeline for a Body: 4 Hours in the Middle of a Ferguson Street," *The New York Times*, Aug. 23, 2014, [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/24/us/michael-brown-a-bodys-timeline-4-hours-on-a-ferguson-street.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/24/us/michael-brown-a-bodys-timeline-4-hours-on-a-ferguson-street.html?_r=1).
4. For more on the response from the Ferguson community, see the Organization for Black Struggle website, <http://obs-onthefmove.org/page/2/#sthash.1BSjDw6n.dpuf>.
5. Milton J. Valencia and Evan Allen, "Diversity in Ranks Limited, Mass. Police Try to Build Links," *The Boston Globe*, Sept. 2, 2014, <http://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2014/09/01/massachusetts-police-forces-lag-racial-diversity/RnEIJW5TuVki4ndotvl2GK/story.html>.
6. Elahe Izadi and Wesley Lowery, "Meet the Missouri Highway State Patrol Captain Who Has Taken Over in Ferguson," *The Washington Post*, Aug. 15, 2014, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2014/08/14/meet-the-missouri-highway-state-patrol-captain-who-is-taking-over-in-ferguson/>.
7. Radley Balko, "How Municipalities in St. Louis County, Mo., Profit from Poverty," *The Washington Post*, Sept. 3, 2014, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-watch/wp/2014/09/03/how-st-louis-county-missouri-profits-from-poverty/>.
8. Travis Gettys, "Video Shows Police Shot Ohio Man 'On Sight' as He Leaned on Toy Gun in Walmart, Attorney Says," *The Raw Story*, Aug. 26, 2014, <http://www.rawstory.com/rs/2014/08/26/video-shows-police-shot-ohio-man-on-sight-as-he-leaned-on-toy-gun-in-walmart-attorney-says>.
9. Donovan X. Ramsey, "Police Killings Picked Up Where Lynching Left Off," Medium, <https://medium.com/@idxr/police-killings-picked-up-where-lynching-left-off-8fcb717ee5e2>.
10. Isabel Wilkerson, "Mike Brown's Shooting and Jim Crow Lynchings Have Too Much in Common. It's Time for America to Own Up," *The Guardian*, Aug. 25, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/aug/25/mike-brown-shooting-jim-crow-lynchings-in-common>.
11. Sy Mukherjee, "Police Fatally Shoot Unarmed Former Football Player Who May Have Been Seeking Help after a Car Crash," Think Progress, Sept. 15, 2013, <http://thinkprogress.org/justice/2013/09/15/2621871/police-fatally-shoot-unarmed-man/>.
12. Robert P. Jones, "Self-Segregation: Why It's So Hard for Whites to Understand Ferguson," *The Atlantic*, Aug. 21, 2014, <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2014/08/self-segregation-why-its-hard-for-whites-to-understand-ferguson/378928/>.
13. Ibid.
14. Wilkerson, "Mike Brown's Shooting and Jim Crow Lynchings Have Too Much in Common."
15. Paul Brandeis Raushenbush, "How These Righteous Religious Leaders in Ferguson Are Giving Us Hope," *The Huffington Post*, August 20, 2014, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/paul-raushenbush/religious-leaders-in-ferguson\\_b\\_5694630.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/paul-raushenbush/religious-leaders-in-ferguson_b_5694630.html).
16. Jim Dalrymple II, "How Clergy in Ferguson Succeeded Where the Police Failed," BuzzFeed News, August 21, 2014, <http://www.buzzfeed.com/jimdalymplei/how-clergy-in-ferguson-succeeded-where-the-police-failed>.
17. Yasmine Hafiz, "Ferguson Police Reportedly Shot Pastor Renita Lamkin with Rubber Bullet during Protest," *The Huffington Post*, August 14, 2014, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/08/14/ferguson-pastor-shot-police-rubber-bullet\\_n\\_5678973.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/08/14/ferguson-pastor-shot-police-rubber-bullet_n_5678973.html).
18. Staff Reports, "Six Arrests Made as Protests in Ferguson Stay Small, Peaceful," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, August 21, 2014, [http://www.stltoday.com/news/local/metro/six-arrests-made-as-protests-in-ferguson-stay-small-peaceful/article\\_240a2e9c-a160-5d69-8a7b-c98e04d027d1.html](http://www.stltoday.com/news/local/metro/six-arrests-made-as-protests-in-ferguson-stay-small-peaceful/article_240a2e9c-a160-5d69-8a7b-c98e04d027d1.html).
19. *God's Politics Blog*, "Eyewitness: 'The Police Force in Ferguson Is Lying, and I Am Bearing Witness,'" Sojourners, <http://sojo.net/blogs/2014/08/18/eyewitness-police-force-ferguson-lying-and-i-am-bearing-witness-photos>.
20. Eleanor Goldberg, "How to Help Ferguson Get Food, Counseling, Education They Need," *The Huffington Post*, Aug. 20, 2014, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/08/20/how-to-help-ferguson-\\_n\\_5694923.html?ncid=fcbklnkushpimg00000047&ir=Black+Voices](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/08/20/how-to-help-ferguson-_n_5694923.html?ncid=fcbklnkushpimg00000047&ir=Black+Voices).

# QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What new information did you learn from this essay?
2. What thoughts does it provoke in you?
3. What has your church community done to address racial injustice locally and nationally?
4. What steps are you taking or might you take to combat racial injustice locally and nationally?